

Bhavan's Book University



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born on July 20, 1913 to a Russian mother and a Hungarian father, Smt. Savitribai Khanolkar acquired Indian citizenship after her marriage to the late Major-General Vikram R. Khanolkar, brother of Dr. V. R. Khanolkar, noted cancer specialist and a former Vice-Chancellor of Bombay University.

Though a non-vegetarian by birth, Smt. Khanolkar, even as a child, preferred vegetarian food. Nature and its beauty thrilled her; she adored the sun and sea. All along she felt she belonged to India. Impelled by her intense spiritual yearnings, she set out in search of a guru. The momentous meeting with her guru, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, removed "all my doubts and a joy never before experienced flowed into my heart".

Though a foreigner, in course of time, she so identified herself with the Indian way of life and thought, that she could not think of being anybody else except an Indian.

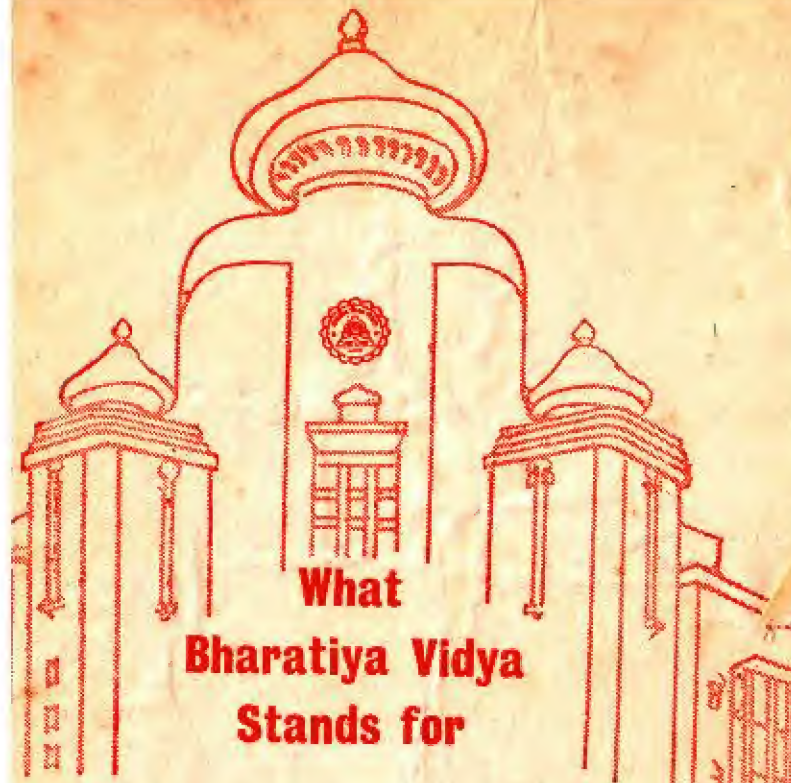
Eva, as she was known before she married, learned Indian music, Sanskrit and Kathakali. She speaks Marathi like a native and is proficient in Hindi. Besides her mother tongue, she knows English, French and Italian too.

After her husband's untimely death in 1952, she repaired to the Ramakrishna Vedanta Ashrama in Darjeeling and later settled down in Maharashtra. It was during her stay in Wai that she developed a great reverence for the Saints of Maharashtra and was inspired to write about them. This book is a collection of the articles that appeared in the *Bhavan's Journal* to which she is a regular contributor.

SAINTS OF MAHARASHTRA

SAVITRIBAI KHANOLKAR





What Bharatiya Vidya Stands for

Bharatiya Shiksha must ensure that no promising young Indian of character having faith in Bharat and her culture Bharatiya Vidya should be left without modern educational equipment by reason merely of want of funds.

2. Bharatiya Shiksha must be formative more than informative, and cannot have for its end mere acquisition of knowledge. Its legitimate sphere is not only to develop natural talents but so to shape them as to enable them to absorb and express the permanent values of Bharatiya Vidya.

3. Bharatiya Shiksha must take into account not only the full growth of a student's personality but the totality of his relations and lead him to the highest self-fulfilment of which he is capable.

4. Bharatiya Shiksha must involve at some stage or other an intensive study of Sanskrit or Sanskritic languages and their literature, without excluding, if so desired, the study of other languages and literature, ancient and modern.

5. The re-integration of Bharatiya Vidya, which is the primary object of Bharatiya Shiksha, can only be attained through a study of forces, movements, motives, ideas, forms and art of creative life-energy through which it has expressed itself in different ages as a single continuous process.

6. Bharatiya Shiksha must stimulate the student's power of expression, both written and oral, at every stage in accordance with the highest ideals attained by the great literary masters in the intellectual and moral spheres.

7. The technique of Bharatiya Shiksha must involve—

(a) the adoption by the teacher of the *Guru* attitude which consists in taking a personal interest in the student; inspiring and encouraging him to achieve distinction in his studies; entering into his life with a view to form ideals and remove psychological obstacles; and creating in him a spirit of consecration; and

(b) the adoption by the student of the *Shishya* attitude by the development of—

(i) respect for the teacher,

(ii) a spirit of inquiry,

(iii) a spirit of service towards the teacher, the institution, Bharat and Bharatiya Vidya.

8. The ultimate aim of Bharatiya Shiksha is to teach the younger generation to appreciate and live up to the permanent values of Bharatiya Vidya which is flowing from the supreme art of creative life-energy as represented by Shri Ramachandra, Shri Krishna, Vyasa, Buddha and Mahavira have expressed themselves in modern times in the life of Shri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, and Swami Vivekananda, Shri Aurobindo and Mahatma Gandhi.

9. Bharatiya Shiksha while equipping the student with every kind of scientific and technical training must teach the student, not to sacrifice an ancient form or attitude to an unreasoning passion for change; not to retain a form or attitude which in the light of modern times can be replaced by another form of attitude which is a truer and more effective expression of the spirit of Bharatiya Vidya; and to capture the spirit afresh for each generation to present it to the world.



BHAVAN'S BOOK UNIVERSITY

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SAVITRIBAI KHANOLKAR



1990

BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN

KULAPATI MUNSHI MARG,

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आ नो भद्राः क्रतवो यन्तु विश्वतः।

Let noble thoughts come to us from every side

—Rigveda, I-89-i

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	Page
Kulapati's Preface	v
Introduction	viii
1. Sant Jnaneshwar	1
2. Sant Namadev	37
3. Sant Janabai	50
4. Sawata Mali	55
5. Chokhamela	58
6. Narhari Sonar	64
7. Gora Kumbhar	68
8. Raka Kumbhar	72
9. Santaji Pawar	75
10. Sant Janajasawanta	81
11. Jagamitra Naga	83
12. Sena Nhavi	87
13. Kanhopatra	90
14. Bhanudas	94
15. Janardana Swami	99
16. Sant Eknath	103
17. Mankoji Bodhale	137
18. Sant Tukaram	142
19. Sant Ramadasa	160
20. Latib Shah and Shaikh Mohammad ..	173
21. Niloba and Other Disciples of Tukaram ..	176

KULAPATI'S PREFACE

The Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan—that Institute of Indian Culture in Bombay—needed a Book University, a series of books which, if read, would serve the purpose of providing higher education. Particular emphasis, however, was to be put on such literature as revealed the deeper impulses of India. As a first step, it was decided to bring out in English 100 books, 50 of which were to be taken in hand almost at once. Each book was to contain from 200 to 250 pages.

It is our intention to publish the books we select, not only in English, but also in the following Indian languages: Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam.

This scheme, involving the publication of 900 volumes, requires ample funds and an all-India organisation. The Bhavan is exerting its utmost to supply them.

The objectives for which the Bhavan stands are the reintegration of Indian culture in the light of modern knowledge and to suit our present-day needs and the resuscitation of its fundamental values in their pristine vigour.

Let me make our goal more explicit:

We seek the dignity of man, which necessarily implies the creation of social conditions which would

allow him freedom to evolve along the lines of his own temperament and capacities; we seek the harmony of individual efforts and social relations, not in any makeshift way, but within the frame-work of the Moral Order; we seek the creative art of life, by the alchemy of which human limitations are progressively transmuted, so that man may become the instrument of God, and is able to see Him in all and all in Him.

The world, we feel, is too much with us. Nothing would uplift or inspire us so much as the beauty and aspiration which such books can teach.

In this series, therefore, the literature of India, ancient and modern, will be published in a form easily accessible to all. Books in other literatures of the world, if they illustrate the principles we stand for, will also be included.

This common pool of literature, it is hoped, will enable the reader, eastern or western, to understand and appreciate currents of world thought, as also the movements of the mind in India, which, though they flow through different linguistic channels, have a common urge and aspiration.

Fittingly, the Book University's first venture is the *Mahabharata*, summarised by one of the greatest living Indians, C. Rajagopalachari; the second work is on a section of it, the *Gita*, by H. V. Divatia, an eminent jurist and a student of philosophy. Centuries ago, it was proclaimed of the *Mahabharata*: "What is not in it, is nowhere." After twenty-five centuries,

we can use the same words about it. He who knows it not, knows not the heights and depths of the soul; he misses the trials and tragedy and the beauty and grandeur of life.

The *Mahabharata* is not a mere epic; it is a romance, telling the tale of heroic men and women and of some who were divine; it is a whole literature in itself, containing a code of life, a philosophy of social and ethical relations, and speculative thought on human problems that is hard to rival; but, above all, it has for its core the *Gita*, which is, as the world is beginning to find out, the noblest of scriptures and the grandest of sagas in which the climax is reached in the wondrous Apocalypse in the Eleventh Canto.

Through such books alone the harmonies underlying true culture, I am convinced, will one day reconcile the disorders of modern life.

I thank all those who have helped to make this new branch of the Bhavan's activity successful.

1, Queen Victoria Road,
New Delhi,
3rd October 1951

K. M. MUNSHI

INTRODUCTION

I feel the very name "Saints of Maharashtra" epitomizes in one short sentence the grandeur — depth — infinite bliss and perfection of such souls as rarely bless our planet, even singly, but who literally flooded Maharashtra together and at the same time.

What is unique is that all of them without exception fulfilled all the requirements of sainthood: Absolute faith and dependence on God and complete absence of egotism, greed and lust so that their very lives were throughout examples of humility, universal love and devotion.

Unlike so many so-called and self-appointed "God-men" of today, they harboured neither pride nor possessions. They were humble to the point of belittling themselves and which is indeed all the more astonishing considering their backgrounds, each and every one of them, artisan, worker, out-caste — courtesan, maidservant or learned Brahmin, fully realized the Oneness of Vedanta, the highest philosophy propounded by sages of the Upanishads and later by Shankaracharya. In their simple ways they transcended dualism itself and soared into the domain of formless, infinite bliss. In recent times I can only recall Sri Ramakrishna and his close disciples to have achieved the same realization in their lives. Yet in the Maharashtra of the 13th century there existed over a score of such intensely self-realized souls who actually practised the philosophy of Vedanta in their fields

INTRODUCTION

ix

construction grounds, kitchens, workshops or wherever they were as it came to them most naturally.

The courtesan and the maidservants like the tailor, potter or gardener and the goldsmith knew the world to be the reflection of the other forms of God — God indeed appeared to the gardener as the water, the flowers, the well, bucket and ropes. It was His play, His Lila!

Having the realization of oneness abiding with them forever, they also had — and mark the marvelous combination — a deep and childlike dependence on the form aspect of God as represented by the image of Vithala Panduranga.

The one pity is that so little is known about so many. Namadeva in his abhangas describes the lives of his contemporaries. His poetic biographies as well as his own autobiography are all that we have of the main group of saints. A later day Namadeva called Vishnudasama continued with biographies of later saints especially northern ones.

Of many, we only have a few abhangas which they left without a hint about their own lives.

The whole family of Jnaneshwara is remembered among the foremost of the saints. Each left abhangas transcending the conception of relativeness in such a subtle and poetical manner as to have the listener spellbound.

Namadeva's and Chokhamela's entire families were fervent devotees whose beautiful abhangas are still recited in Maharashtra. Unfortunately no material is available concerning the saint of Karnataka, Pundalika who came to Pandharpur and installed the images of Vithala and Rakhumai there.

There are few references to him in the saints' abhangas and from hearsay we know that he was a very devoted son who kept Krishna waiting outside, standing on a brick ("Vitha") while he completed ministering to his parents. Vithala rewarded his filial devotion by agreeing to abide in a temple built for Him at that very spot.

We know nothing about Damaji who opened the king's treasury to the poor or Kurma Das whom Jnaneshwar and Namadeva went to meet.

These simple souls who grasped with ease what sages discuss or strive to understand must have electrified the whole state with their fervour.

To imagine what those holy Kirtanas initiated by Jnaneshwar and Namadeva must have sounded like with a score of realized souls singing God's names at the top of their voices, must indeed cause one's hair to stand on end.

Kirtanas very soon crossed the boundaries of Maharashtra and flooded the whole country where the memory of Saint Jnaneshwar and saint Namadeva will be lovingly remembered for having created so simple and sweet a mode of self purification and worship: The Namasamkirtana!

May all our blessed readers follow in their footsteps and attain bliss.

S. K.

SANT JNANESHWAR-1

Swami Ramananda scrutinised gravely the young man lying prostrate before him.

"Get up, my child, what is your desire?"

"My Lord," begged the man, his eyes brightening, "My Lord, make me your disciple," and he remained with folded hands, looking expectantly for a sign of acceptance in the Master's countenance.

"You want me to give you sanyasa?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"Tell me all about your background, and we shall see."

"I am a Yajurvedi Brahmin from Apegaon in Maharashtra. My name is Vithal Pant and I am the son of Nirabai and Govind Pant."

"Have you any dependants?"

"None, O Prabhu, except my aged parents in Apegaon."

"Vithal Pant, prepare yourself, for I shall accept you."

The Guru was pleased. His new disciple's humility, fearlessness, sincerity and deep feeling of renunciation appealed to him. How true was the saying that the perfect disciple is as rare as the perfect Guru. Both are blessed in each other for he who renounces the world must have full faith in his Guru.

Swami Ramananda's Math or Ashrama was in Kashi (Varanasi). He was one of the famous yogis

of the times. Vithal Pant was duly initiated, he gave up his worldly ties, including his sacred thread and tuft of hair as sanyasins must live above these differentiations and be free as the wind. He was given the name of Chaitanya Swami or some say Chaitanya Ashrama, and became Ramananda's foremost disciple.

All was well except for one grave mistake. Vithal Pant had lied in saying that he had no relatives but his aged parents. Vithal Pant was indeed married to a sweet girl from Alankapur (Alandi).

It is an old rule that a married man who wishes to leave the world must first obtain his wife's permission to do so and Vithal Pant had been repeatedly refused the same. His young wife Rakhumabai had pleaded in vain, saying "After we have a son, then only shall you go." But his urge to renounce everything in order to dedicate his life to the pursuit of the eight-fold yoga and God-realisation was so strong that he committed the unpardonable sin of lying to his Guru.

His marriage had not been an ordinary one. It was while on his way to visit the many *yatras* and *tirthas* of the South that he chanced to halt at Alankapur which is known today as Alandi. While bathing in the sacred Indrayani river, he attracted the attention of the local Kulkarni who was a good and saintly man and owned several villages. He forthwith invited him to stay at his house.

"My name is Shidopant and I should be honoured to serve a Brahmin like you."

Vithal Pant accepted and spent some time there. Then, one night, Shidopant had a strange dream: he found himself praying to God Vithala of Pandharpur

(Krishna), when a celestial voice ordered him to offer the hand of his young and only daughter Rakhumabai to Vithal Pant, in marriage. The voice urged him on, saying: "Great souls will be born of this union for the good of the world."

Shidopant awoke and was non-plussed for his daughter was barely eight years old, and Vithal Pant did not seem inclined towards matrimony. However, obeying his dream, he approached him and humbly requested him to accept young Rakhumabai as his wife.

As could be expected, Vithal Pant was aghast, but felt that if it were the will of God, he would have to comply on condition that he too should get a similar dream. So, Shidopant placed his guest's bed amidst the Tulsi plants of his garden and prayed to Narayana to fulfil the condition if he intended the marriage to take place.

His prayer was answered as a yogi presented himself in Vithal Pant's dream, exhorting him to marry Rakhumabai without delay. So, in the morning, he related his dream to Shidopant and the auspicious date and time of the marriage were decided upon. They spent thus many a happy year in Alankapur, frequently making long pilgrimages when Vithal Pant would be engrossed in *kirtans* and religious discourses. Then it was time for Vithal Pant to remember his ageing parents and with Shidopant accompanying them, they left for Apegaon. The old couple was nearly blind with crying and sorrow at the "loss" of their only son of whom they had had no news for so long.

Their joy was unbounded at being reunited with

him. "I have brought you a sweet daughter-in-law," said Vithal Pant, and introduced Rakhumabai to them. Her father who had brought several gifts was also delighted to see them. Shidopant however returned to Alankapur while the young couple served their old parents lovingly and diligently.

Sometime later, an epidemic unfortunately claimed Nirabai and then Govind Pant. Vithal Pant wept bitterly. Later he and Rakhumabai returned to Alankapur (Alandi).

Rakhumabai began to notice her husband's increasing restlessness and her fears were only proved too true. Vithal Pant kept on asking her permission to leave the world and become a sanyasin. On her father's advice, the poor girl could do no more than say "After we have a son, then only shall you go."

As no children were born, Vithal Pant's impatience grew and one night while his young wife slept, he quietly got up, and left the house, the town and the green valley of Alankapur spliced by the clear waters of the Indrayani and made his way stage by stage to Kashi. Some years later, returning pilgrims mentioned having seen Rakhumabai's husband among the disciples of the great Ramananda, and all hope vanished from the helpless girl's heart. She began to lead a life of austerities, subsisting on a single meal a day, serving the Holy Ones and praying for her husband while circumambulating the sacred Ashwatha tree.

As destiny would have it, Ramananda decided to go on a long pilgrimage of the South, culminating in the "darshan" of Holy Rameswaram. So, leaving his trusted and favourite disciple Chaitanya Swami in

charge of the Math at Kashi, he travelled with a small group of disciples and reached after some time the charming little city of Alankapur, sacred for its Siddheshwar Temple.

As he rested in the Hanuman Temple on the shore of a small lake, Rakhumabai chanced to come there for her daily rounds of prayers and perambulations of the ancient Ashwatha tree. Seeing a holy man and his disciples seated in the temple hall, she dutifully touched his feet while he casually gave her the blessing normally given to married women: "May you be the mother of a son."

Rakhumabai could not help smiling for she had good reasons to know the futility of such blessings on her. Ramananda noticed her smile and asked abruptly, "Daughter, why do you smile at my blessings?"

Rakhumabai's eyes filled with tears as she exclaimed: "Oh Holy One, how can your words come true when my husband has left me without my consent and has become a sanyasin in Kashi?"

Ramananda was shocked. "I cannot utter a lie," he said, "and my words must come true." He sent for Shidopant and asked him which foolish Guru had given sanyasa to his son-in-law in those circumstances. When he heard his own name being mentioned, he recoiled, as this made him partly responsible for the same error. Without losing a moment, and taking along with him the young wife and her father, he returned to Kashi and confronted the disciple who welcomed him effusively.

He glowered in anger, "As you see, we have come back earlier, and we have been in Alankapur."

The disciple began to shake with fear.

The Guru went on.

"Do you know who these people are? Your wife and her father Shidopant. So you lied to me, you lied to your own Guru!"

Vithal Pant threw himself at the mercy of his Master and lay prostrate before him, clutching the feet of the Swami.

"My Lord, show mercy."

"I shall forgive you only if you obey my orders. Rise and go back to Alankapur, take your sorrowing wife and raise a family; that is all."

Placing his hand on the head of the penitent disciple as a parting blessing, he dismissed him.

Back in Alankapur, the joy of Shidopant and Rakhumabai at the return of the lost one was not shared by the rest of the town who looked on horrified at the unheard of event of a man who once having renounced the world, came back to it. It was very much like someone swallowing his own vomit. The Shastras never even mentioned such a thing. So, after laughing and ridiculing them, the Brahmins decided to ostracise them. They became outcastes who were not allowed to sit at meals near Brahmins or partake of any of their activities.

In order not to embarrass the good Shidopant, Vithal Pant and his wife retired to the outskirts of the town and built a hut of leaves where they lived for several years. They had transgressed the laws of society, so they were made to pay for it through countless harassments by the local population. Vithal Pant who was a saintly man, bore it all with his wife without a murmur.

Another 12 years passed before their children

were born, some say in Apegaon where they were visiting, others say in Alankapur.

The eldest son was born in 1273 and Vithal Pant named him Nivrutti which means in yoga parlance, the Controller and Subduer of the senses. "This", said Vithal Pant, "is the first step towards Self-realization."

Two years later, in 1275, came Jnana Deva or Jnaneshwar, or "the Attainment of Knowledge." "Once the senses are under control, one receives Divine Knowledge," explained Vithal Pant, and then followed at two-yearly intervals, Sopan, "the Way." — "Once you have divine knowledge," said the father, the path is made easy. "And lastly a girl, Mukta, "the culmination of all three, in Liberation or Salvation."

All the four shone from their very births like jewels of knowledge and overflowed with constant love for one another, their parents, for the whole humanity and God. Their grasp of spiritual truths was astonishing, considering their young age.

Vithal Pant who bore hardships with a resigned heart, felt blessed in the birth of these unique souls. It was now time to initiate the boys in the duties of the twice born (Brahmins). But when he approached the local pundits, they consented to hold a meeting of learned men to decide what should be done.

With great humility, he bowed to the assembly of pundits and placed his plight before them and asked them to show him by which austerity he might mitigate the wrong he had done to society. "Show me the way to atone for my sins," he repeatedly pray-

ed. "These children of ours are innocent, let them not have to pay and suffer on our behalf."

The pundits agreed but as they dived into their sacred books, they could not find even the mention of such an occurrence and shaking their heads sadly, they confessed themselves unable to deal with the problem. They suggested that Vithal Pant should take his family to Pratisthana (Paitan), which would enable him to consult there the very cream of all pundits.

The father and children bowed in acceptance and then left for Triyambakeshwar near Nasik, on the banks of the Godavari. It was the same river which flowed by Apegaon, and Vithal Pant and his family began there a series of austerities, circumambulating the Brahmagiri mountains daily before sunrise and worshipping at the Triyambakeshwar Temple.

One night, as the pious family wended its way through the pre-dawn mists on the narrow hill paths, the roars of an angry tiger transfixed them with terror and as the beast suddenly leapt in their midst, they all fled with shrieks of fear. All reached home safely except Nivrutti, of whom there was no trace. With deeply sorrowing hearts, the bereaved ones resumed their *tapascharya* (penance).

But Nivrutti had not been touched by the tiger. He had escaped by various mountain paths and found himself completely lost. He chanced to reach the mouth of a deep cave where he saw yogis and wild beasts living together in perfect harmony. He was intrigued and he penetrated deeper into the cave until he met a yogi of shining countenance seated in deep meditation. The yogi opened his eyes and met those

of the 10-year-old boy. He was struck by the high state of wisdom, awareness, sincerity and potentialities of Nivrutti.

When the boy told him who he was, the yogi smiled and spoke affectionately.

"I am Gaininath, disciple of Gorakshanath. My Guru had foreseen your coming and told me to initiate you into the sacred knowledge of the Self and that you should in turn pass on this knowledge to your middle brother. My Guru's words are being fulfilled."

So saying, he gently placed his hand on the head of Nivrutti who lay prostrate at his feet, ready to receive the essence of True Knowledge in the path of Yoga.

He must have been an exceptional pupil, for in seven days Gaininath completed his teachings and again reminded him to teach the same to his brother Jnaneshwar, "for," said the Guru, "Jnana Deva has a mission to fulfil in this world and will be the guide of many."

Brimming with renewed life, freed from the burden of guilt of his family and elated with joy, Nivrutti reached home where he was received with open arms and tears of relief and happiness.

He duly fulfilled his pledge to his Guru, and initiated Jnaneshwar under the sacred and ancient Odumber tree by the Godavari, the same tree they say, which had once sheltered the great Rishi Gautama. Later Jnaneshwar taught the knowledge of Truth to Sopan and Muktabai.

Vithal Pant had taken great care of the education of his children, perfecting them in the Sanskrit and

Marathi languages. They resided in Triyambakeshwar for a year, by which time Jnaneshwar became a full-fledged and practised yogi, adept in the eight-fold yoga, at the tender age of eight. He already grasped fully the meaning of Brahman and Shakti or Prakruti (The Divine Energy) and realised the absolute Reality of Truth. His face shone with the resplendence of realisation. His heart had attained complete peace.

Then Vithal Pant and Rakhumabai felt they could leave their children to fend for themselves and they took the path of renunciation and sacrifice by going to Prayag, the confluence of Ganga and Yamuna and invisible Saraswati, and there plunging into the river together, ended a life of sorrow and mortification.

Back in Triyambakeshwar, the sorrowing children decided to leave for Pratisthana, by the Bhogavati river and redeem their parents' name from the wrongs of society. They brought with them a letter from the Brahmins of Alankapur, and as they reached exhausted after long marches in the hot sun, the pundits came to their rescue, refreshed them with water, food and sweet words and inquired as to their purpose of coming from so far and alone.

Nivrutti handed over to them the letter they carried since a year and which was read amidst hue and cries of: "Shame," "Che-Che-Che," and "who ever heard such a thing as sanyasin turning Grihasta." They convened a great meeting in the main temple hall and started to pore into their holy books.

At first they told them kindly that the remedy lay simply in doing good works such as repeating God's name and abiding with the truth. The children were well pleased until they realised that the pundits

refused to give them the requested purification letter. They seemed to be but small improvements on the Alankapur pundits.

They ridiculed them no sooner the children requested them for a letter of purification and piled abuse upon them.

"Who cares for caste, race or creed?" cried Nivrutti in the assembly, "I am the fearless, nameless and formless Atman which resides in all creatures. I am immortal, neither with or without form."

"True," said Jnaneshwar.

"They are ashamed of us" concluded Sopan, "they consider us impure. But what was the purity of the castes of the Pandavas and the Rishis Vyasa and Valmiki?"

"What is in a name?" asked Jnaneshwar, "When nothing exists outside the One infinite Brahman, my Atman is no different from yours or from that passing he-buffalo!"

At that, the pundits were greatly amused and taunted the boy saying, "If the he-buffalo is as much a part of the Atman as you, let us hear him recite the Vedas."

"Why not" said Jnaneshwar, "all things belong to the same Brahman who has no caste and breathes through them all. The Vedas speak of caste according to one's nature, not birth. The Vedas are universal in essence and belong to all."

"Take care," warned the Brahmins, "not to trifle with the sacred scriptures. If what you say is true, then the buffalo should be able to recite the Vedas."

"My Lord," said Jnaneshwar to the Head Pundit, "permit me to say that as divinity resides in all things

whether awake or dormant, so does it even in this humble buffalo."

"Ha-Ha-Ha", laughed the learned men, "Hey over there! Drive that buffalo into the hall!"

The buffalo was dragged willy-nilly into the circle of the large audience and they repeatedly asked Jnaneshwar to make the animal recite the Vedas.

"So be it," said Jnaneshwar. His boyish face did not seem perturbed and he merely turned to the helpless beast, petted its forehead, smiling affectionately and asked him gently: "If the True Self which resides in all things abides in you, speak the truth to all present."

Jnaneshwar began to recite a passage of the Rig Veda, extolling the inner meaning of the word "AUM," when the buffalo took over and completed the verses in a deep and clear voice.

Silence filled the meeting hall. The Brahmins, one and all sat as if stuck to their seats; then as one man, with tears streaming down their faces, they rushed to the boy who still smiled gently on them and one by one, placed their heavily-turbaned heads on his slender feet.

"Forgive us," cried the Head Pundit, "We have been steeped in ignorance and arrogance. Thou art truly a saint and an Avatar of Divine Knowledge, thou art a realised soul! Blessed be thy parents and blessed thy clan, for giving birth to such a wise one as thee! We humbly beseech thee to forgive us."

SANT JNANESHWAR-2

Jnaneshwar, embarrassed by this great show of respect and pleased with their change of heart and humility, spoke humbly and kindly to reassure them all. The pundits gave him the place of honour and carried him in procession. They gave Nivrutti a letter for the learned men of Alankapur, stating that they were not fit to "make" Brahmins those who were already far above them and represented the very essence of Brahmins.

They gifted the buffalo to the children and wished them fare-well as the little family was once more on its way. Wandering along and passing many a beautiful place with green orchards and fields by sparkling rivers, along steep mountain ranges graced with villages and sometimes a singing waterfall, or an enchanting little valley, they came to a village named Nevashe on the banks of the Pravara in today's Ahmednagar district. At the request of the inhabitants, they decided to settle there for a while.

Jnaneshwari:

Jnaneshwar with his mind always fixed on the reality of Brahman and the universal Oneness of God, was pained at the ignorance of the good people in the villages who did not understand the higher Truths in the sublime teachings of the *Gita*, since few apart from the higher castes ever understood Sanskrit. Why shouldn't it be made available to all in their own tongue Marathi? So he set himself forthwith to trans-

late and explain the Lord's immortal song in Marathi, dressing it with the lively imagery that touched the hearts of simple folks.

It was an unforgettable sight. The crowds of young and old, men, women and children sitting spell-bound in the little temple of Mhalasa and listening avidly to the honeyed words of the young boy in his early teens.

Leaning against a pillar, which can be seen even today, in the flickering lights of burning oil lamps, his eyes flashing and sometimes clouding with tears of compassion, Jnana Deva charmed and deeply touched his audience as he unravelled the mysteries of the *Gita* and expounded it for the first time in their mother tongue Marathi. Time itself seemed to have left the premises as none felt inclined to leave his presence. Scholars and peasants, all found their doubts cleared. Jnaneshwar's ideas and images did more than scholars in thousands of years. He showed a precious understanding of life which they well appreciated as sometimes he would cause them to give a hearty laugh by his humorous descriptions.

Jnaneshwar named that large book *Bhavarta Dipika* (Light on the inner Meaning) but people called it for all times to come the *Jnaneshwari*. It was completed when he was only 14 years old.

The annals of these days report that a man named Sachidananda was revived after death by Jnana Deva who took pity on his devoted widow.

"A name as true and pure as Sachidananda (which means Truth, consciousness and bliss) cannot die, therefore O Sachidananda, do arise."

The man lived for many years and was deeply

devoted to Jnaneshwar. It was he in fact who wrote down the *Jnaneshwari* as the young saint went on reciting it.

Meanwhile at Alankapur, the fame of Jnaneshwar and his brothers and sister spread far and wide and the people of that town repented bitterly for the ill-treatment they had meted out to them; therefore, Jnaneshwar, sensing their feelings, decided to return, and there was great rejoicing in Alankapur as the young holy family set foot again on the soil of their birth while Nevashe sorrowed in its loss.

Maharashtra which had not yet seen the Muslim invasions, enjoyed at the same time, the bliss of scores of saints from all walks of life. Apart from Nivrutti, Jnaneshwar, Sopan and Muktabai, there was Nama Deva, the tailor's son and the foremost of the devotees of Vittala (Krishna) also known as Panduranga, in Pandharpur. He was five years older to Jnaneshwar. Narhari was a goldsmith, Gora, an ordinary potter, Chokamela and his wife were outcastes, Sawata, a gardener, Janabai a maid-servant, and so on.

They formed themselves into a group called the Varkaris (the pilgrims) or the Vithala Sampradaya. They were on an incessant pilgrimage of life, the goal of which was the complete immersion of their selves in the sea of Bliss that was God. Jnana Deva met these extraordinary devotees whose touching verses of pure devotion still echo throughout Maharashtra and they soon made him their leader.

The Varkaris made no distinction between Shiva and Vishnu, between Brahmins and outcastes; the keys to the sanctum of the divine Lord were simple

enough: Love of Panduranga (God) and love of all his devotees.

Maharashtra with its ancient rugged land of weirdly shaped volcanic mountains silhouetted against the brilliant skies, its graceful waterfalls and moody rivers encircling towns, villages and green fields, and orchards, resounded with their entrancing calls to the refrain of "Vithala, Vithala, Panduranga."

Entire villages were seen to dance in ecstasy as so many saints fired them with the enthusiasm of the holy Name. They were all united in the love of Panduranga. They all had a clear vision of the Unity in diversity, of Reality as expressed in universal Oneness through love. Such unalloyed love of God, completely free from selfishness and pride, sprang up naturally in their purified hearts. They were sincerely humble, bowed to all and embraced whosoever repeated the sacred name of the Lord.

Eighty of Nama Deva's *abhangs* have found a place in the Guru Grant Sahib of the North, just as saint Gora, the potter is often quoted as far south as Kerala. Their verses are translated into several languages. They are in fact the initiators of Hari Katha and Nama Samkirtana and due regard is paid to them at the start of any such festival.

They were addressed as Sants (Saints) and recognizing Jnana Deva's superior achievement in the realm of yoga and knowledge and as one who had his senses fully under control, they looked upon him as a rare combination of intellect and love. He was thought to be the incarnation of Self Knowledge or Brahman.

No country has ever seen such a conglomeration

of saints all at one and the same time. Blessed indeed is Maharashtra which nurtured these great souls. Apart from their contribution to the religious life, they also enriched Marathi literature to a very great extent.

Jnaneshwar spoke in clear and realistic words.

"I am related to the objects as waves are related to the sea."

He would ridicule the boastings of ostentatious devotees as "the vain who take pride in erecting arched gates of their merits and who are in reality like fools planting a broomstick on a temple spire."

He showed the greatest of regards to his Guru: "The spiritual Teacher is like a spring to the garden of Self-realisation of the aspirant and though formless, is the form of mercy incarnate."

"He cannot be described" explains Jnaneshwar. "Is it possible to add lustre to the sun?"

The world's unreality is expressed in most of his sayings: "Ignorance is insubstantial as a shadow. If ignorance is real as it seems, men would have been drenched by the rain painted on a picture."

Jnaneshwar transcended both knowledge and ignorance and merged into the formless aspect of God as he claimed: "I saw God without the eyes, touched Him without hands and embraced Him without a body."

One can judge by the following verse concerning the state of mind of a sage or devotee, how subtle and perceptive his thoughts were:

"The ideal sage does not even cross a stream for fear of breaking its serenity: he moves slowly as a crane treads the surface of the water lightly, or as a

bee tenderly alighting on a lotus, lest its movements spill the pollen. He regards the very atom as a part of life and walks gently as if by compassion."

How can one express through words, the Knowledge and Feeling of the Ultimate Oneness? "It is beyond words and description," says Jnana Deva, "just like a puppet of salt which becomes totally absorbed when immersed in a vessel of water."

So Jnaneshwar constantly exhorted his followers to "plunge into the ocean of bliss that is God, without any regrets," "Repeat the holy name of Ramakrishna and sing it in the 10 directions. You will attain peace at the feet of Hari."

These are a few of the sayings of a boy who chose the highest goal of the Sages and Rishis when others merely spent their time in games, squabbles or other boyish pursuits.

There lived not far from Alandi a yogi who, one hears, had succeeded by the correct use of Hatha Yoga (breathing and postures) in reaching up to the age of 1,400 years. Once a year he would renew his body cells through a method combining special breathing exercises and meditation.

Chang Deva, as was his name, had heard of Jnaneshwar and desired to meet him. His disciples numbered in thousands and yet he was unable to find which was the proper form of address to such a young sage. Therefore he sent him a messenger carrying a blank piece of paper in lieu of a letter. This of course caused great amusement among Jnaneshwar, his family and followers.

Chang Deva finally started with all his retinue of bellowing and thumping followers, beating drums,

blowing trumpets and hollering to the four winds. He chose an appearance calculated to impress and strike terror in the young sages. Dressed in skins, astride a fierce tiger, with a cobra for a whip and his long matted locks beating the air, he approached the little valley cradling Alandi, like a raging tornado.

Jnaneshwar, Nivrutti, Sopan and Mukta were seated on a wall, enjoying the evening breeze. "What is this commotion up there in the hills?" asked Mukta.

"This is Chang Deva coming forward to meet us, riding his huge tiger", said Jnaneshwar. So all three asked: "Why don't we go and welcome him?"

"Right," answered Jnaneshwar. "We ought to go and greet the ancient one and show him our respect." So saying, Jnaneshwar patted the wall with his hand and ordered it gently: "Come on, O wall, rise and carry us towards the yogi."

The annals relate how the crowds accompanying Chang Deva fell silent in sheer amazement as they saw four figures riding a brick wall, descending from the skies. Chang Deva hurriedly got down from his tiger and as Jnaneshwar walked towards him with folded hands, he threw himself at his feet, drenching them with his tears.

"Alas," he cried again and again in agnony, "I have been a fool. Though I lived 1,400 years, I have achieved nothing. The only power I have is on living things, whereas you, Jnaneshwar, at such a young age are already an accomplished yogi who masters and controls even inert matter. Instead of seeking the Truth of Self Realisation which is the goal of mankind, I have wasted such a long life in trifles like yogic powers!"

Jnaneshwar's eyes were moist with compassion

and he comforted the old one with kind words. He composed then and there verses of instruction to Chang Deva about the search after Truth which he had not obtained. Muktabai became his Guru and taught him true renunciation and how to rise above the differentiations of name and form. Chang Deva dismissed his thousands of disciples and became as a child to a child Guru. His *abhangs* testify to his deep devotion and realisation. "Speak words of silence," advised Mukta whose teachings surpass in subtlety many a modern or ancient thinker. "In divine ecstasy, you hear the beginningless sound and the mind gets regulated by the thread of breath, then you enjoy a state which goes beyond deep sleep and consciousness."

Muktabai's poetry is one of the gems of Marathi literature.

Chang Deva was fortunate indeed to sit at the feet of these four saints. He compares them in touching words: "Jnana Deva drinks in full the essence of pearls, Nivrutti holds in his hands the shade of the clouds, Sopan wears the garlands of fragrance and Muktabai cooks diamonds for her supper, and the secret of all four comes into my hands."

Visoba Khechara was an elderly man who disbelieved in Jnaneshwar and never ceased to trouble him or his brothers and sister. At last Jnaneshwar's compassion touched his heart and he changed completely and became their most ardent disciple. He became in turn Saint Nama Deva's Guru.

Nama Deva became greatly attached to Jnaneshwar. They both relished each other's company. Nama Deva found the reasoning power of Jnaneshwar

soothing to his restlessness and Jnana Deva rejoiced in the unabated devotion Nama Deva showed for Vithala whom he treated as his near and dear one.

Both left on a pilgrimage to the North, accompanied by many other saints and taught people all along their way.

It was on their return to Pandharpur that Jnaneshwar suddenly declared his intention of leaving the world and even his body by a voluntary act of deep samadhi, at Alandi.

There was great consternation everywhere. He could not be dissuaded as he told his friends and followers, his mission was accomplished and it was time for him to go. He was leaving behind his monumental work the *Jnaneshwari*, the *Amrut Aanubhava* and countless *abhangs*, devotional poetry or teachings in verses.

Most reluctantly the crowds of saints and devotees followed the young sage to Alandi, causing similar distress to its inhabitants. Nama Deva recounts the incidents in detail through his own *abhangs*.

They dug a pit to the left of the Siddheshwar temple, at the foot of an Ajana tree. They spread a mat or Kusa grass and covered it with a deer's skin.

The crowds sang *kirtans* for three days and nights uninterruptedly. The valley resounded with the tunes of "Ramakrishna Hari Vithala Panduranga."

Then Jnaneshwar having bathed in the Indrayani dressed in a saffron cloth, his curls playing round his serene face as if trying to distract him from his resolve, smiling lovingly, prostrated himself first to his Guru and before all: "Forgive me, my friends, if I

have ever offended any of you, and kindly grant me permission to go."

With tears streaming down their faces, the villagers approached him and applied auspicious marks on his body and garlanded him with fragrant blossoms. Sobbing bitterly, they sought his blessings and parting words. Mukta particularly, Sopan and Nama Deva felt like forsaken orphans and the ancient yogi Chang Deva wept like a child.

Jnaneshwar consoled them all with sweet words full of affection and asked them to rely entirely on Vithala; "Let Him be your support, grieve not."

So saying, he slowly descended the steps to the bottom of the pit, saluted the ten directions and prayed silently. He sat cross legged, his hands resting on his knees in the *Abhaya mudra* and his eyes fixed upwards, he plunged into deep concentration, drawing his life-breaths up, stage by stage and discarding the body in the process. The final Samadhi set in and Jnaneshwar's soul pierced the last obstacle in the Brahmandhra (at the top of the head) and merged blissfully into the Infinite.

All the assembled saints and followers cried in unison: "Jaya Shri Jnaneshwar." (Glory to Jnaneshwar) and rained flowers on him and prostrated themselves for the last time. With heads bowed in sorrow, men heaved a heavy slab over the cave's orifice and sealed it forever.

This is how Jnaneshwar at 21 left this world on the thirteenth day of the dark fortnight of Kartika, in 1296, having fully conquered himself and guided thousands on the path of God-realisation.

Three hundred years later, thanks to Saint Ek

Nath's efforts, a temple was built over the *Samadhi* which exists to this day.

Within one and a half years, Sopan, Mukta Nirutti and Chang Deva followed his example in that order and left this world for the peace and bliss of Brahman which they had obtained.

TEACHINGS OF SANT JNANESHWAR

Two influences seem to have prevailed in Maharashtra before Sant Jnaneshwar's advent. That of the Naths and of the Mahanubhavas.

The first book in Marathi on Vedanta was the *Paramamrita* by Mukundaraja, a practising philosopher and saint, in which he describes in detail the various stages and states of God-realisation. Mukundaraja, who later became King Jaitrapala's teacher, was a disciple of Adinatha whose teacher was Hari-natha. Jaitrapala, King of Devagiri (now Daulatabad), ruled from 1191 to 1210 A.D.

Mukundaraja was also the author of *Viveka-sindhu*, which together with *Paramamrita* constitute the oldest records of Marathi literature to date.

In Jnaneshwar's time ruled the good King Ramadevarao, a great patron of learning who lavishly endowed the great temple of Panduranga in Pandharpur with many riches. He is also mentioned by Jnaneshwar towards the end of his great work, the *Jnaneshwari*.

Maharashtra was then a peaceful, bountiful and strifeless land until calamity struck in the form of 30,000 horses unleashed by Malik Kaffoor, a Sardar of Allaudin Khilji, which totally obliterated Ramadevarao's dynasty. Jnaneshwar had already passed from this world by the time this came to pass.

It appears that the Mahanubhavas belonged to a peculiar and particular cult entirely disregarding *dharma* as understood in the Vedas. They refuted not

only the Vedas but the lofty teachings of the *Upanishads*, erroneously identifying Shri Krishna with their own beliefs. They worshipped none but Him and not even Shri Vithala of Pandharpur who didn't appear to be their own idea of Krishna. Their 11th century founder was a certain Chakradhara by which name they also called Krishna.

Jnaneshwar however wasn't influenced by them as he quotes freely from the very original sources of Hinduism as the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Gita* and the *Bhagavata*. His all enveloping religion of Oneness shows no such stain of restriction and narrow-mindedness.

The Natha sect was different and blended well with the high concepts of Vedanta. It is known that Jnaneshwar's great-grand-father Trimbakpant who was made provincial governor of Bida in 1207, under the Devagiri King, had been initiated in Apegaon by none else but the great Gorakshanatha himself as later Gaininatha became the guru of Nivrutti, elder brother and guru of Shri Jnaneshwara. Guru Matsyendranatha is the legendary founder of that sect. It was a powerful movement that spread from Maharashtra to Bengal, in fact all through India. Many are the temples built by them all over Maharashtra, particularly in the Satara District.

According to Jnaneshwar, though sects develop peculiar rites and customs, as a whole they belong to the same uniform Ocean of Knowledge where man seeks his redemption from a seemingly perpetual gyration of births and deaths, all triggered by his unquenchable thirst for lust, fame and greed.

Whether saints take birth in one community or

another is of no importance. What matters is their teachings and their practice of those teachings.

The name *Santa* in Sanskrit means the folding of hands in humility and adoration. Thus all the saints including Jnaneshwar pay the highest respect to each other. Jnaneshwar says it is they who sow the seed of God-realization which, adds Jnaneshwar, will flower through their kindness and become a source of bliss and a solace to the rest of the world.

"Just as the sky" says the saint, "is mirrored in an ocean and is not forbidden from being reflected in a pond, God's grace indeed appears in all."

Jnaneshwar tries with a wealth of imagery to bring down the great Truths of Vedanta and of the Purusha and Prakriti within the grasp of the ordinary people. Man should understand what his birth is about and what his ultimate goal should be.

Just as the *Upanishads* speak of the two birds sitting on the same branch, one eating and enjoying the fruits it finds, and the other merely watching it, Jnaneshwar speaks of the Purusha abiding on the banks of the river Prakriti and watching her while she goes about her business, without getting himself involved in any way.

Jnaneshwar praises humility greatly. How profound is his analysis of a humble man who might be a self-realized soul within and without, withdrawn from the world! "Such a man seems to live in solitude, he makes friends with the wind, holds converse with the sky and loves the trees in the forest as dearly as his own self. A humble man is he who regards all beings from the ant to the highest God as identical with his own self."

So does Jnaneshwar express his intense feelings of oneness, of peace in the pure state of universal harmony of one freed from the shackles of selfishness and at one with nature.

So touchingly does Jnaneshwar describe how his sensibilities blend immediately with the sweet murmur of the brook, the fleeting shadow of the clouds and the gentle breeze that "He doesn't even cross a stream for fear of breaking its serenity. He walks softly as if by compassion. The road is a path of compassion and the direction that of love. Gently he spreads his life below other beings' feet, so that he may be a source of happiness to them and he treads the earth tenderly like a cat holding its kittens with its teeth so as not to injure them... He raises his hand only to afford protection. Never would he even dream of playing with or tossing garlands of flowers about. Such a man is gentleness itself, humble and with an intense regard for all living beings and things as parts and parcels of the one and same Infinite Self.

"The realized man is never affected by sorrow or other afflictions. Like the great boundless ocean, he can find room for rivers of grief without being disturbed by them. He is friendly with the whole world to the point where he cannot distinguish between himself and others.

"Without implicit faith in the Guru, one achieves nothing," continues Jnaneshwar. "The Guru resides within one's heart like a fixed star where one worships him incessantly. So when the Sun of Realization arises, the liberated man fills his basket with innumerable flowers of pure devotion and worships the

Guru with them. Indeed, he regards his Guru as his own and true Mother!"

Jnaneshwar, at such a young age shone with the highest knowledge of the spiritual life and had at the same time more than a mature awareness of the temporal existence.

His images are striking: "A man with an impure mind cannot be called pure even if he performs good actions." He compares him to a corpse adorned with ornaments. One ought to meditate on death before one's senses dim with the onset of senility. One should live in complete detachment lest at the time of separation from the objects of the senses one should have to endure grief and sufferings. Man ought to beware of the pitfalls of attachment which bring one back again and again within the clutches of life and death just as one wouldn't rest one's head on a coiled serpent or enter a burning house or perhaps share the tiger's den. The unattached man should keep clear of temptations.

"The unattached one," continues Jnaneshwar in his wisdom, "is he who lives in his body like a guest in his host's house. Thus, man should not crave for sexual union with his wife any more than one would long for one's shadow creeping along one's body." Jnaneshwar treats the craving of people for children as nothing but an illusion. "They must be regarded as passengers who accidentally meet, as cattle that rests under any tree."

Anyone desirous of avoiding rebirth should shun the bustle of large cities and retire in the solitude of the forests. Once one realises one's unity with all things, all traces of fear automatically vanish.

What is charity according to Jnaneshwara? It is sacrifice, not only in kind but in mind as well, to one who suffers in affliction, just as a tree gives itself wholly, shade, leaves, flowers, fruits and roots to a weary traveller.

One should cover other's defects just as a good man first covers a woman who has been robbed of her clothes and then only looks at her. So, by one's qualities, one ought to cover others' defects and compassion should be fair and impartial like the cool and soothing moon ray which bathes the good and the bad alike in its glow.

True love should be like the Sun destroying darkness everywhere, and opening temples of lustre for the world to rejoice in. Day and night one's primary duty should be to achieve the happiness of the human race; our own interests come second.

"Only when physical and mental egoism is removed by knowledge," says Jnaneshwar, "does the soul free itself and becomes one with Brahmar just as when an empty pitcher is broken, the air inside it merges with the atmosphere outside."

Jnaneshwar advises both Shaivaites and Vaishnavites to repeat God's name at all times. What is God-realization if not complete identification with Him?

"It is indeed sheer folly," says he, "to suppose that once the devotee surrenders, and comes face to face with God, he still retains his separate identity. It's as foolish as to expect buttermilk to return into its former state of milk or fire to re-enter the sticks that produced it."

Sri Ramakrishna would add that when God so

wishes, He leaves the devotee with a harmless individuality to perform His works. As Ramaprasada said: "O Lord, I do not wish to become sugar as I want to taste sugar."

"However," adds Jnaneshwar, actions must be well performed. There is no sense in leaving a boat in mid-stream nor in giving up a lamp before the lost object be found by its light. Until one realizes the Self and becomes fixed in It, one has to adhere to duties and the like and accomplish them to the best of our abilities.

"Which unfortunate mortal," asks Jnaneshwar, "seeks gratification in heaven when the Goal of existence is to ride above merit and demerit and identify with the essence and cause of all things? Because they have not realized the Self, men are carried to heaven by their sinful-merit of not having known God. They become gods as long as their good Karma lasts and then they fall back to earth and live again in the world of mortals."

Here Jnaneshwar makes a distinction between the realized souls and others still labouring under their mistaken feeling of separatedness. "Worship God, without fear of consequences or desire, as a chaste woman worships her Lord. The path of *In-action* is not for the beginner but for those alone who have been able to discard all concepts of egoism and separatedness. Truly, no one can get away from the interplay of actions and therefore they should be discharged in a completely detached manner. One should be as regardless of the fruit of our works as a nurse-maid feels about the child of another or one should be like a man crossing a stream by holding on

to another swimmer without claiming that he swam himself. The results we know, belong to God alone, lovingly offered to Him in whom all things return."

Wisely, he cautions: "Actions will drop away by themselves at the proper time, as a creeper or a tree sheds its leaves and fruits when it can no longer hold them."

"Therefore" exhorts the saint, "let us not wait for the morrow but purify our mind instantly by offering all actions to God. Thus most certainly lies the true path to freedom from birth, death, sorrow and all kinds of bondage. This includes also thought. Our whole system must be geared to Godliness and nothing else."

Here are some of his lovely imageries: "As the chariot doesn't worry or concern itself whether it travels in the right direction, let us leave the decision-making to God whether what we do is of great or little importance. The only way to overcome egoism is to constantly practice and make a habit of thinking that God alone is the Doer. So, when the time comes to leave the body, our mind would already have been centered on God and realized Him.

"We must not be deceived by the parts we play and the qualities associated with them in our present life, no more than an actor who is not fooled into the unreality of the play. Kama, Krodha and Lobha (lust, anger and greed) are the soul's highway robbers. Where such qualities prosper, hell indeed is near."

Jnaneshwar's practical view of life leaves nothing to be desired. Since misery is one of its essential features, man should try to see God through them.

He should be restless in his urge to see Him like one sitting in a boat leaking through hundred holes.

"Even the worst sinner can reform," maintained Jnaneshwar, "by thinking of God. Having bathed in the waters of repentance, he enters his heart's temple purified, and with devotion approaches the Lord, surrendering meekly unto Him. All evil will fall off, like so much dust blown by the wind."

"To God," says Jnaneshwar, "either caste, sex, colour or family are of any avail. What matters is that our mind should be fixed on Him. All castes become one in the Lord, just as small rivulets after flowing into Ganga identify themselves with the Ganga.

"The devotee should first seek God's grace in true belief and humility. Thus will the Guru appear at the appointed time. In the fullness of time when past Karma's fruits are exhausted, and new ones cease to bear fruits, the Guru directly reveals himself as the sun naturally follows the darkness. The only way is constant remembrance of God.

"He who has once tasted of the bliss of the Self, can never, never return to the world of senses or sensual pleasure, as he has found Himself, is full within himself, and has no need to go out into states of differences.

"As the sun is not affected by its reflection in the water, so the Self-realized man remains unaffected by events and feelings which might concern him. That man looks upon a mountain of gold and a clod of earth in the same way."

Here Jnaneshwar's poetical mind produces one of the loviest descriptions of a yogi or devotee wrapped in meditation, "Swaying gently like an unblown

lotus animated by a struggling bee within its petals."

"People," warns the saint, shouldn't be impatient as even the sun doesn't reach the zenith in a matter of seconds. Progress takes its own time. A devotee is at one with other devotees, loving all those who love God. The waves of the two lovers of God mingle and mix with each other."

Jnaneshwar, a true Jnani, fed his divine knowledge with pure Bhakti, humility and love. He feels shy of describing his love: "The relation between us is that of wife and husband. To talk about such things bring on sweet concern and joy. I would rather not have spoken those words, had not my love made me utter them."

Jnaneshwar's description of the Oneness of devotees with God couldn't be clearer: "When one mirror reflects another, which reflects which?"

In Advaita, he says, there is still Bhakti and he adds: "It's a matter of experience and not of words. *The love of the devotee can be compared with the aggregate of all terrestrial loves.* For there is actually no comparison to the highest feeling the human mind is capable of. God is a sequel, yet the force which propels the heart towards Him is even stronger than that of a lover for his beloved. Could one say it is like the urge of embracing one's mother and lover at one and the same time? In God, a devotee finds final and complete fulfilment of thousands of previous lives' yearning for such a moment. The Bliss is that of desirelessness and of all-embracing love. Fear and anxiety take to their heels and peace infinite abides."

Jnaneshwar calls himself a follower of the Ma-

haesha (Shaivaite) sect yet his highest tributes to God and the saints is his priceless commentary on the *Gita*, the *Bhavartha Dipika*, and his *Abhangas* in their subtle beauty, cry for the love of Vithala (Krishna.)

It is strange how a boy of 14 mastered what older sages tried to achieve after long lives of penance. Exceptional as a human he was also exceptional as a saint. His penetrating vision embraced the world within and without. An accomplished yogi from a tender age, he was also a young man melting with infinite compassion for the sorrows of humanity.

What did Jnaneshwar request as a reward for his wonderful and all-encompassing presentation of the *Gita*?

"May the evil-minded drop their wickedness, and may they nurture a spirit of love and friendliness towards all! May the rising Sun of Truth dispel the darkness of sin and all the people find fulfilment in their religious duties and in their own lives! May each receive what he yearns for within his heart and may the Saints forever bless and visit all the creatures of this world!"

Jnaneshwar, humble as all saints were in those days, maintains that it was through the saints' help and blessings that he was able to compose the sacred *Bhavartha Dipika* (*Jnaneshwari*). One wonders at such a perfected soul, self-realized while not yet in his teens! Was he perhaps a great Yogi of the past, momentarily sent to us for our uplift, or better, was he not the incarnation of divine Wisdom itself?

In his other work, the *Amrutanubhava*, Jnaneshwar defines the Spiritual Power as potentially present even in the bound souls. It is dormant like the

beauty of a young girl in a new-born child. "There is" he explains, "only a difference of degree." So did Swami Vivekananda maintain that it is also present in lower forms of life. Unconsciously the whole universe seeks release from its own bondage. All meet in the end in one and same love, the same constant Light. Darkness becomes light itself at sunrise just as all tributaries of Ganga become the Ganga.

The *Amrutanubhava* is a work of philosophy and deals in esoteric knowledge, mainly in the wisdom of the *Upanishads*. Jnaneshwar longs to diffuse this knowledge of Truth to the world just as a lamp doesn't burn for its own sake but for the sake of others.

So great is Jnaneshwar's humility which characterises all the Maharashtra saints, that he describes his book as being unable to approach the Truth or what he calls 'the deepest silence,' as if he was trying to draw a crocodile to the surface of water, which is another way of saying that the indescribable beggars description.

Amrutanubhava dwells deeply on the Samkhya system of philosophy wherein play the interchange of Purusha and Prakriti and both ultimately get diffused in Brahman. Creation is a gross vibration or manifestation of that interplay. But Jnaneshwar always assures one that the Atman could be intuitively apprehended. Jnaneshwar then merges Samkhya with Vedanta: "Prakriti is merely the desire form of Purusha who in turn represents the urge of Brahman manifest itself up to itself. Prakriti is like the Purusha's dream and she dissolves the moment he awakens. All this takes place on the surface of eter-

nal Brahman. Purusha depends on Prakriti as she depends on him."

As the ornament of gold would bow to the metal of which it is made, Jnaneshwar bows to Shankara and Parvati.

It would take too long to narrate the incomparable logic of Jnaneshwar, a mere boy of 16 when he wrote his last work. None as far as I can see ever came as near to bringing the proposition of the Infinite within our limited grasp as did Jnaneshwar. His analogies are unique and he uses them freely to bring home the concept of Brahman, the formless, which remains unaffected though seemingly involved in its reflection.

It is stupefying, to say the least, that while the Europe of 700 years ago meandered in the Middle Ages of persecution and superstition, a child of 16 expounded scientifically the highest philosophical knowledge concerning the Absolute, and subtly and charmingly blended it with a range of Bhakti which only the greatest saints and realized souls attained. With sublime humility, he taught all and sundry, in a voice quivering with love and compassion for humanity's sufferings.

One wonders which sage was it who took birth as this child or which manifestation of the Supreme Being blessed this land.

Ah, Jnaneshwar, we truly and joyfully bow to you, as the reflection to the Image and the link of the ornament to the ornament. Blessed the days which saw your radiance envelop Maharashtra with its lustre, from where it must disseminate to the entire world.

SANT NAMADEV

For five consecutive centuries, Maharashtra was blessed with a crop of innumerable saints. The 13th and 14th centuries were particularly so.

They were all devotees of Shri Vithala, also called Panduranga (Krishna), whose temple stands in holy Pandharpur by the Chandrabhaga river.

What made them so wonderful is the beautiful poetry of divine love with which they expressed their deep longing and joy and the unity that bound them all in the love of God. Their songs still reflect the holy thoughts of yore, as they are sung in every town and village of Maharashtra.

Free from constraints, they embraced whosoever repeated the name of God. As Jnaneshwar said: "Happiness and sorrows are alike; the only reality is Hari's name, He remains one's sole support." The world was but an image "as is it was reflected in the reverse in a mirror" The saints advised all: "Sing the name of Ramakrishna Hari and greet the Lord in all beings."

The originators and propagators of the cult of Hari Nama Kirtana and Hari Katha, were the young saint Jnaneshwar, his brothers Nivruti and Sopan, sister Mukta and Nama Deva.

Saint Pundalika is the one who brought the image of Vithala and installed it in Pandharpur. He came from Karnataka. All saints therefore first bow to

saint Pundalika's temple before paying their respects to Shri Vithala. These congregations are called *Varkaris* (pilgrims) and said to belong to the *Vithal Sampradaya*.

Nama Deva was born on a Sunday, in the Shukla Ekadeshi of Kartika of the year 1270, five years before Jnaneshwar.

A Brahmin astrologer predicted that the boy would compose a hundred crore of *abhangas* (religious verses). Nama Deva was the son of Gonnaibai and Damasheti, a tailor who hailed from Narasinghpur.

When Nama Deva was five years old, his mother once sent him with a cup of milk to the temple, saying "Your father is late today, so you take the milk to God and offer it as *Nivedan*."

The little boy trotted away carrying the milk very carefully and placed it before Shri Vithala.

"Drink this milk." He told the Deity. But as could be expected, the stone *Murti* remained impassive.

"Please, why don't you drink it?" He asked again and again, quite perplexed at this show of indifference at his request.

"Mother said you must drink the milk, so why don't you drink it? Is it because I brought it?"

The milk naturally remained untouched.

When offering food to God, it is understood that the divine Spirit only blesses the food which is then accepted and shared by devotees as *Prasad*.

But little Nama Deva could not understand such subtleties. He became more and more impatient and finally utterly dejected.

"All right, if you refuse to drink it, I shall break

my head on these flagstones!" He cried, tears flowing out of his eyes, as he readied himself for a head crash on the hard floor. But at that instant, the cup was miraculously emptied and Vithala stood smiling before the little boy. So, content, Nama Deva brought back the cup to his mother.

"What is this? She exclaimed, "What did you do with the milk that was in it?"

"Shri Vithala drank it."

"Don't lie! You must have drunk it yourself."

"No, Mother, I didn't. Shri Vithala drank it himself."

The sounds of quarrelling brought Damasheti into the house. His wife told him about Nama Deva's lies and misbehaviour. He decided, however, to watch for himself by following his son the next day, when Gonnaibai sent him again to offer a cup of milk to the Deity.

The same proceedings took place as the day before and Vithala obliged Nama Deva by duly emptying the cup. Damasheti witnessed the presence of Shri Vithala obeying his little boy's orders under threat, and fell at His feet.

Vithala blessed both father and son and advised them not to repeat what they had seen.

Very soon, Nama Deva began to regard Vithala as his very own and dearest one. He would spend all his days in the temple, listening to songs in praise of the Lord, and yearning in sweet verses for a vision of God. His mother constantly remonstrated with him. She bought cloth from the bazar and sent him to his father's shop to learn cutting and stitching. But her

Nama Deva was to be found again crying to his Vithala in the temple.

Gonnai took him by the hand and dragged him home, but found to her amazement that she was taking Vithala Himself and not Nama Deva. So she returned several times to the temple, unable to know which was which between her son and Vithala.

Nama Deva was married at a young age to Rajai-bai. The young wife was as perplexed as her mother-in-law about the attitude and doings of her husband. She too went to the temple and prayed to Vithala not to take her husband away from her. Vithala instead brought her to surrender herself to Him.

Nama Deva dedicated himself completely to God and His service. His songs ever more intense and beautiful were repeated in all corners of the land and whoever came to Pandharpur, first bowed to Nama Deva, God's own beloved devotee.

There is a legend that one day that very young sage Jnaneshwar, his brothers Nivrutti, Sopan, and his little sister Mukta came for the first time to Pandharpur to have a *darshan* of Vithala. They fell at feet of the *Murti* without first bowing to the devotee Nama Deva.

Thereupon Nama Deva felt exceedingly hurt and composed couplets censuring the young family of saints who did not even show normal respect to him who attended on the Lord day in and day out.

Mukta, the young sister of Jnaneshwar who wasn't even in her teens, retorted that it was strange indeed for one who called himself a saint to speak thus.

"He has learnt nothing, though he lives near God all the time."

Nivrutti and Jnaneshwar tried to pacify her but she went on saying. "His pride is an impediment to his realization; he must give it up."

And then and there she composed *abhangas* decrying those whose pose as saints without the necessary humility.

Finally it was agreed that another much respected saint Gora, who was a potter, would test Nama Deva's spiritual achievement. Gora was totally immersed in the name of God and tested devotees by splashing some mud on their foreheads and declaring them baked or unbaked according to their standing on the rungs of the ladder of spiritual development. Having tested several saints including Jnaneshwar and his brothers and sister, he found them all "baked pots" but when the turn of Nama Deva came, he pronounced him an unbaked one, or one who was not yet fully established in selfless relationship with God.

Nama Deva cried complainingly to Shri Vithala who then took pity on him and directed him to a Guru. That Guru was Visoba Khechara, himself a disciple of young Jnaneshwar.

Nama Deva left for Amvadhya and was told that Visoba was resting in the temple. Having entered the temple, he was shocked and surprised to find his future Guru lying on the floor, with his feet on the idol of Shiva.

"My Lord," said Nama Deva, "kindly remove your feet from the Linga."

"That's right, my son," said Visoba Khechara to Nama Deva, "I am an old man and haven't got full control of my limbs and senses, so please remove my feet and place them where God is not."

Nama Deva obingly took hold of his feet and placed them by the side of the Linga. But to his astonishment, another Linga immediately sprang up beneath the feet of his Guru. He went on trying in several directions, but wherever he turned, he found no place to rest the old man's feet as Lingas were everywhere.

"Arey Namya!" said Visoba. Then the truth dawned in Nama Deva's mind and he fell at the feet of the holy one, who blessed him and taught him how to recognise God's presence, indeed everywhere, in all things, seen or unseen.

Jnana Deva and Nama Deva met often thereafter and Gora the potter acknowledged Nama Deva to be a full-fledged saint who had crossed the barriers of differentiations and who had fully realized God.

Jnaneshwar always encouraged Nama Deva and praised his true devotion to God. They both became exceedingly attached to each other. Jnaneshwar and Nama Deva organised regular festivals of *Hari Katha* and *Kirtans* at Pandharpur and taught the masses.

Nama Deva was taking his meal one afternoon when a dog unexpectedly rushed up to his plate and carried away a piece of dry bread. Nama Deva instantly got up with a vessel of ghee in his hand, crying:

"O Lord! Come back and take this ghee, lest your stomach ache, eating dry bread!" And he ran after the dog. Yes, Nama Deva had learnt to realise God's presence in all things.

Nama Deva spent all his time in the presence of God. He talked to Shri Vithala, sang and danced before Him. God's sweet name was the spark of his

life and flooded the world. Nama Deva would sing in ecstasy and describe how the devotees were treated to a grand feast by Shri Vithala and Rakhumai (Rukmini) with a variety of dishes of which they partook to their heart's content. The eats were nothing but the holy name of Hari.

The Lord was Nama Deva's friend, teacher and companion and the devotee would constantly run to him when in difficulties and take advice from Him.

So when Jnaneshwar requested Nama Deva to accompany him on a *yatra* to the North, he first recoiled at the idea of leaving his beloved Lord Panduranga.

"I have everything here, in the blissful Lord," said Nama Deva. "What need do I have to see other places? He is my everything and in Him I see the whole world without leaving Pandharpur."

Jnaneshwar insisted so that Nama Deva went and asked Panduranga who told him to trust and follow Jnaneshwar and remember Him wherever he went.

Visoba Khechara, Goroba Kumbhar, Sawata mali, Chokhamela and Bamka were among the saints who accompanied them.

They once reached a desert in Rajasthan where they were greatly distressed by thirst as they could find no well for many long weary miles. At last, they reached a deep well, so deep in fact that there were no means to get at the water shimmering in its depths.

Jnaneshwar using his yogic powers, took a subtle form and having dived into the well, quenched his thirst. Then he offered Nama Deva and others to bring them water in the same way but Nama Deva

would not hear of it. If Jnaneshwar's powers could help him to get water, wasn't the power of Vithala equal and even superior to that? Why should his friend go to this length of trouble on their behalf? He prayed to Vithala: "O Panduranga, Thou art truly everywhere and thy child thirsts in the desert. Do come to my help!"

Immediately he said these words, a jet of water spurted out of the well and refreshed all the *yatrikas*. Jnaneshwar warmly embraced Nama Deva.

"My friend, thou art indeed the most beloved devotee of the Lord!"

Some time later on their way to the South, the party rested in a famous Shiva Temple. Nama Deva, fired with the desire to please the Deity and remembering his beloved Vithala, stood in the assembly hall of the temple and started a *Kirtan* full of devotion and love. It soon attracted great crowds who fervently joined in. The priests of the temple found these devotees a nuisance to their daily routine as they blocked their way to the inner shrine and complained that it was Shivaratri and whoever allowed this admixture of castes inside the holy of holies, preventing priests from carrying on their duties? This was a Shiva temple and not Pandharpur!

"What is this beating and clapping going on inside our temple?" They told Nama Deva in an irritated fashion, "Go outside and carry on there whatever noise you want to do at the back of the temple."

Nama Deva bowed to the priests and the whole *Kirtan* was shifted to the back court yards and the devotees roared in unison, singing the whole night long: "Blissful Lord of Pundalika, Hari Vithala!"

Nama Deva felt pained that the Lord Naga Nath in the temple wasn't before them and so they say, did the Lord feel offended at the attitude of the priest that He turned the whole temple to face the devotees singing with joy and devotion.

The priests were greatly surprised in the morning, after completing the Shivaratri worship, to see the sun rise in the west as they came out of the temple gates, until they realised that the complete structure had shifted. They begged Nama Deva and the saints for forgiveness and brought them into the temple in great joy.

Jnanadeva was barely 21 when he had completed in his early teens his superb work, the *Jnaneshwari* and *Amrutanubhava*, and left his priceless *abhangas* for posterity.

When Jnaneshwar, who had no attachment to the world and whose mind was fixed on the Absolute Brahman, decided to give up his body in order to reunite himself entirely with the Infinite, Nama Deva and all the saints followed him to Alankapur, known today as Alandi.

Nama Deva describes in heart-wrenching details the last days of his great friend. Jnaneshwar blessed him and left him in God's keeping. Yet, he could not reconcile himself to Jnaneshwar's passing away in *Mahasamadhi*.

"I am tormented in my heart on account of Jnaneshwar and feel like a dried up lake, empty and restless without him!" He would cry before Vithala: "I cannot live without Jnaneshwar whose philosophy and knowledge always cheered me in times of difficulties.

His smile I see no more, alas, I yearn for him who was so gracious unto me!"

He sorrowed for so long that God was made to say: "O Namaya! Cry no more. Jnaneshwar is Me and I am always beside you."

But Nama Dea continued to weep for his friend, so God at last vouchsafed him and *darshan* of Jnaneshwar surrounded by celestial beings. Then only did Nama Deva's heart again feel at peace.

Nama Deva's realisation of God did not prevent him from leading a householder's life. Unlike Jnaneshwar who had renounced the world, he had a wife and sons and a daughter. Yet, he had no attachment to worldly possessions. He often preached that he saw no difference between a clod of earth and gold.

Not far from Nama Deva's house lived a Brahmin named Parissa Bhagavat. He had gratified the Goddess Rakhumai and obtained from her a *parissa* as a gift. A *parissa* is a magic stone which turns iron into gold by a touch.

"Hide it," he told his wife Kamalaja, "and don't breathe a word about it to anybody."

But the Brahmin's wife and Rajai, the spouse of Nama Deva, were good friends and as they met by the river, washing clothes, the former asked the other: "Tell me, how do you manage your household?"

"I don't!" complained Rajai, "What with a husband and children and other relatives perpetually immersed in the worship of God, I have the greatest difficulty in providing even a simple meal! How do you manage, yourself?" She asked Kamalaja.

"We have a *parissa*," she answered, "and when-

ever there is a need, I touch a few utensils with it, sell the gold and buy enough to last us quite some time."

"You are lucky," retorted Rajai, "Would you mind showing me the *parissa* some time?"

The lady didn't mind and in fact invited Rajai to come over to her house the next day and borrow the magic stone for a day. So Rajai transformed a few articles into gold, sold them and was able to provide an excellent meal for the family.

When Nama Deva came home, he was surprised at this lavish spread and asked: "Wherefrom did you ever get these things? Surely you know we can't afford such costly food, and unless you tell me the truth, I won't partake of the meal."

No sooner had his wife confessed about the stone than Nama Deva asked to see it and without wasting a moment, he promptly flung the magic stone into the river.

Rajai burst into tears and at the same time, the Brahmin's wife severely rebuked by her husband for divulging their secret possession, hurried to Nama Deva's house, and asked for the return of her *parissa*. When she heard the truth from Rajai, she started a loud wail which attracted her husband and all the neighbours.

The Brahmin was fuming with rage, accusing Nama Deva of dishonesty.

"This hypocrite has robbed me of my *parissa* and in order not to return it, says he threw it away into the river! His greed is exposed for all to see!"

Nama Deva who seemed quite unconcerned while the rumpus went on, calmly asked the Brahmin: "If that *parissa* is so important to you, stop shouting, for

I shall presently dive into the river and retrieve that stone of yours."

Nama Deva did as he had said and brought back a whole heap of stones from the river bed. He threw the lot before the Brahmin and said: "See if your *parissa* is among them."

The Brahmin and the townspeople speedily touched each stone to bits of iron and found to their amazement that all the stones had the magic power of a *parissa*.

The Brahmin's eyes opened as he realised how he had foolishly hankered for petty ephemeral goods instead of seeking the everlasting bliss of God's name, and threw back all the stones into the river. Then he fell at Nama Deva's feet. "My Lord," he cried, "place your hand in blessing on my head, I want nothing else!"

Parissa Bhagavat became a saintly devotee whose *abhangas* are still remembered.

Nama Deva had identified himself with God and sang: "The Brahman (God) is caught up in the mesh of love. I am God and God is I. God resides always in the heart of his devotees!"

Yet he did prefer pure devotion to the Ideal as when he said: "Keep your knowledge to thyself, O Vithala, all I want is to love thee!"

Nama Deva left several times to visit the North and preach where he had first gone with his friend and companion Jnaneshwar. After Jnaneshwar, the Muslim invaders had come even in Maharashtra and the happy kingdom of Deva Giri under the benevolent Yadav King Ramadevarao had been ransacked,

destroyed and became known as Daulatabad where Allaudin Khilji installed his own vassal.

Nama Deva composed many verses in Hindi, 80 of which found their way into the *Guru Granth Sahib*. A small temple dedicated to him still stands near Hoshiarpur, Punjab, where he was much revered.

His Marathi *abhangas* number in thousands and have inspired people throughout the centuries with the fire of devotion to God and complete surrender to his will.

They are frank, pure and sometimes childlike in simplicity, yet full of true wisdom that only a realised devotee could summon.

At around the age of 50, Nama Deva took *sama-dhi* and was buried under the steps at the entrance of the temple of Panduranga whom he had loved as his very own. "So that the feet of devotees may bless my remains."

His sons, daughter, sister and daughters-in-law had become devotees of God and left many *abhangas* too.

SANT JANABAI

Seven hundred years ago, the temple of Panduranga or Vithala in Pandharpur was the centre of Maharashtra's greatest wave of religious thought and unsurpassed devotion as scores of saints simultaneously blessed the land. This fervour of devotional feelings dipped in the philosophy of the ages, was to last for five centuries as more and more saints flourished in Maharashtra.

They came from all possible backgrounds, castes and sects. None questioned their antecedents. All that was required was complete faith in God, total immersion in Him and partaking of the joy of the holy Name.

The movement was focused on Vithala (Krishna) and each saint came to regard Him with a special affection, as though God truly lived among them in the flesh and blood. They were attuned to the infinite conception of the formless Brahman and Vithala was their Guide and beloved Friend leading them on to the Goal that was His very Self. They finally recognized Him as living in their own hearts.

Janabai was born to a *Shudra* named Dama, who lived in Gargakhed by the Godavari. She did not stay there long as her father had a dream in which he was commanded to offer her in service to the house of Damasheti, a tailor of Pandharpur and father of the great saint Nama Deva. Janabai was accepted in the

house-hold, treated as a daughter and taught to help in the daily chores.

As she grew, she came more and more under the influence of Nama Deva and other saints such as Jnaneshwar who regularly visited the place.

Her devotion to God increased day by day. Her longing for God became so intense that she forgot all about her tasks. The winnowing basket would remain idle on her lap while tears coursed down her cheeks.

"Alas, without your blessed face and the sight of your hallowed feet, O Vithala, my life is spent in vain!"

While she washed clothes and scoured pots, tears mingled with the water. "I watch the way, oh, why don't you come, O Vithala? Why do you tease me so? My patience is at an end. Jani waits for you, oh, when shall I surrender myself at your lotus feet?"

The grinding stone would halt, the sweeping wasn't done and helpless little Jani's tears would flow on and on.

God should be like a mother to her children. So Jani called pitifully: "My Pandhari Mother, O Vithabai, come do come!"

Or like a friend: "How long shall I wait for your coming, O beloved husband of Rakhumai? Do not be cross with me, says Namya's servant Jani."

Such devotion was due for its reward and at last little Jani sang in joy: "Thanks be to Pandharinath, the uplifter of the fallen! Thanks be to the Lord full of mercy! Thanks be to Nama Deva and thanks be to Jnaneshwar and his brother, for I have seen their

hallowed feet. The servant of Namya has been blessed, as the Lord came to her."

From then on, Janabai's life became full of bliss. The Lord Panduranga came and went and surprised her by joining her at the grinding stones.

With tears of joy, the young girl allowed the Lord to place his hand above hers on the wooden axle and help her turn the round stone, pushing the grain with the other hand into the grind.

Jani sang whole day while going about her duties, with overflowing joy. While she swept, the Lord carried the refuse in a basket, when she cleaned the grain, He did it for her in a trice. Henceforth Jani's life was woven into that of Vithala, Panduranga.

"I eat God, I sleep in God, I breathe God, I feel God, speak God and I give God and take God" she sang in ecstasy.

But little Jani's trials were not at an end. God has ways of testing his devotees, even should they be merely young girls like Jani.

He has also ways to prove at the same time that true devotion never looks back on fear or doubt and knows no weakness.

Vithala having blessed her one night by appearing in her room to help her grind rice, felt hot and discarded His costly shawl and jewel garland. When he left, however he "forgot" his ornaments and shawl and wore instead the patched quilt of Jani.

One can imagine the consternation and commotion that followed the next morning when the priests on opening the shrine door found these items missing, and what was this patched quilt doing on the blessed Lord's shoulders?

A long search led them to Jani's room where the missing ornaments were discovered. Nama Deva alerted by the hubbub in his house understood immediately the trick God had played on little Jani and maintained that her innocence would be proved.

Janabai was dragged nevertheless to the local Ruler's court where the horrified priests created much shouting and ado so that Jani was found guilty and condemned to die on the *Shula*. The *Shula* is a long pointed steel pillar on which the condemned were impaled to meet a swift but painful death.

The young girl's heart froze in terror and she plaintively called on her Lord: "You used to be in and out of the house and comfort me. O Lord, why then do you seem asleep today?"

Held between guardsmen, Janabai was made to cover the stretch of burning sand at a fast pace.

She called on her Friend: "O Lord, you are my everything! Why are you so slow in coming? Just show me your face, I shall ask nought from you again!"

God was pleased and embraced little Jani.

"You were always behind me," she said much relieved, "I did not fear."

When the guards brought her to the place of execution, her eyes met the gleaming *Shula*, sparkling in the sunlight.

It was true, she was not afraid now that her Lord stood by her side; the *Shula* would become soft as water and in fact, this is just what happened.

To the astonished gaze of the crowds the whole *Shula* dissolved into water and so did the sharp swords of the guardsmen. The executioner seeing the instru-

ment of death liquefy itself before his own eyes, gasped in wonder.

Janabai fell at the feet of the Lord in gratefulness. Nama Deva and others exulted. Jani was carried away in procession, everyone seeking her blessings.

"She deserves diamonds, jewels and the finest clothes," cried the priests, "the Lord did right to leave these with her."

Janabai's songs are simple and beautiful, blossoming in tender feelings of love and reaching the depth of soul-searching fervour. They exemplify the true love of a simple heart.

As far as women poets of Maharashtra are concerned, she ranks second after Muktabai, the young sister of Saint Jnaneshwar.

Nama Deva and Jnaneshwar were Jana's teachers and she joined the group of saints that congregated at Pandharpur under the guidance of those two great saints. They were called *Varkaris* or pilgrims and belonged to the *Vithala Sampradaya*. Devotees from all parts of Maharashtra, South and Gujarat, rallied round the call of those saints and spent days on end in complete ecstasy, singing the names of the blissful Lord.

Children in Maharashtra still learn to recite Jani's *abhangas* with joy as they are the sincere outpourings of a young child given to the service of the Lord.

SAWATA MALI

In the rugged land of the Deccan plateau, amidst the picturesque landscape of its ancient mountains and green valleys where fields laze in the sun, lies the village of Arangaon.

We are 700 years back when the farmers worked just as they do today and the villagers could rest under the peaceful shade of the mango, pimpal, wad, adumbara and chinza trees.

On the outskirts, the visitor is captivated by the sight of a beautiful garden neatly laid out with mango and plantain groves, and rows of vegetables.

A pair of bullocks led by a small boy, draw the ropes that bring the water up from a deep well, and bushes of mogra and jasmine abound, mingling their sweet scent with the fragrance of wet earth.

Somewhere, a farmer's voice rises as he busies himself, opening and closing channels for the water to flow freely towards the thirsty earth. He sings in raptures of love and sings to his garden, to the gurgling water while the creaks of the well ropes seem to beat the *tal*, interrupted now and then by the cries of the bullock-boy.

Sawata, the gardener, is a saint. A man who realised God in both His aspects — with form and without form — and who lovingly tends his beautiful garden where God's presence manifests itself in so many ways.

The garden-field was God, the water of love nourished the plants and peace blossomed everywhere.

Sawata was happy, seeing God, tending God, loving God and being in God.

"Glory be," he sang radiating joy and compassion, "Glory be that I was not born a Brahmin saddled with rites and ceremonies, for low-born I am free, and all I ask, O Lord, is Thy compassion." Exulting with joy, he opens the way for the water to reach his patch of flowers and tenderly loosens the earth round the roots.

"Sawata makes a garden where the water of peace makes the jasmine blossom, while Vithala looks on." And he let the clear and cool water of the well ripple through his fingers and spread around the stems of the flowering bushes.

Hoeing, weeding and watering the fields of vegetables, his voice can be heard as he remembers his beloved Vithala.

"Onions, radishes and vegetables, you are my Vithabai, my Mother! Garlic, chillies and 'kotambiri' (coriander) are all my Hari. The flow of water, the well, the rope and water-bag are immersed in Pandhari — Sawata has made the garden and rests his head on the feet of Vithala!"

Sawata was one of the many, many saints who graced Maharashtra in the 13th century with their pure lives, their teachings and incomparable songs. They belonged to the Vithala Sampradaya (tradition) and called themselves Varkaris (pilgrims).

The young saint and yogi Jnaneshwar's superb writings and commentaries in Marathi and saint Nama Deva's magnetic *kirtans* contributed greatly to the religious revival in Maharashtra, especially among

the illiterate masses. Sawata belonged to their group and also accompanied Jnaneshwar, Nama Deva and other saints in their *yatra* to the north.

His childlike devotion and complete immersion in the divine, so well expressed in his *abhangs* endeared him to all, and for all time to come.

It is said that as Sawata was busy tending his garden one morning, Panduranga accompanied Jnaneshwar and Nama Deva to the nearby village of Lahul to meet saint Kurmadas. They passed outside the wall of Sawata's garden and at that time, Sawata fell into a trance, his hands outstretched, his heart overflowing with love and humility.

Panduranga immediately entered the garden and placing his hands on Sawata's head, brought him out of his trance and embracing him, took him to his heart. Sawata made Him sit before him and worshipped him with tears of joy.

The two saints meanwhile had followed the Lord and blissfully partook of Sawata's happiness.

"The power of God's name will banish fear, hit time and death hard on the head. Let us bring from Vaikuntha the Gods to lead the *kirtan* and sing and dance in Vithal's name and rejoice in merry Diwali. Keep the beloved Lord in your mind," says Sawata, "keep on to the path of Bhakti and it will open the gates of Mukti (salvation)."

Sawata's *abhangs* still resound in the villages of Maharashtra where the wells pump water into the fields and men and women sing of Sawata's pure love for the Lord as they toil in the sun. Their tender feelings even now touch the hearts of those who hear them.

CHOKHAMELA

In the days when Maharashtra was alive with God consciousness and saints arose in every village or town to uplift the masses to a high degree of religious fervour and lived the lives of true devotees and men of complete renunciation, there lived in Mangalvedhya a whole family of saints.

At the close of the thirteenth century, the Hindu religion of Maharashtra had flung its doors wide open to all castes and men, women and children who were seized with the love of God were embraced and worshipped as God's very own.

Their caste? Who cared? They all belonged to the *Vithal Sampradaya*, to Lord Vithal or Panduranga of Pandharpur, installed there, maybe a 1000 years ago by the saint Pundalika who hailed from Karnataka.

Ever since, the Kings of Devagiri (modern Daulatabad), and other rulers of Maharashtra have endowed the temple with wealth and the devotees produced such saints and so many at one time, as was never witnessed before anywhere in the world. Maharashtra was truly blessed with the advent of such great souls.

The family of saints which lived quietly in Mangalvedhya was that of Chokhamela, an untouchable, his wife Soyarabai, his sister Nirmala and her

husband Bamka. The family went and settled in Pandharpur.

They were all deeply devoted to Vithala in spite of the authorities at the time not allowing them entry into the temple. All they could do was to stand outside the gate, with their tear-flooded faces, their eyes yearning for a sight of the distant Deity.

Chokhamela sang heart-rending songs to his beloved Panduranga, humbly, very humbly beseeching him for a glance of His auspicious from.

Chokhamela and his wife had no issues. Though they were much distressed about it, they took it to be God's will and asked the Lord for unalloyed devotion to his blessed feet and nothing else.

Panduranga, to test them, came to Chokhamela's door disguised as a Brahmin. "Pray, give me food," he asked Soyarabai in great distress, "for I am starved and request you to feed me with whatever you have on hand."

Soyarabai bowed low to him and said, "Oh, Brahmin, we cannot refuse a guest, for in every guest resides the blissful Lord of the Universe, but please understand that we are Mahars, untouchables. Were the villagers to see you eat from our hands, they would penalise us and even cause us harm."

"They will not harm you," assured the Brahmin, "and all I desire is food prepared by your hands. Bring me whatever you have."

His tone of mild authority and the sweetness of his voice convinced the good lady that if God had sent her a Brahmin guest, it must be His will. So she made the visitor sit on the neatly swept mud floor and served him the curds and rice which she had kept for

Chokhamela's return from work.

The Brahmin seemed to relish every morsel and then disclosed himself as He who was the very Lord of Pandharpur, the Lord of all Creation. Soyarabai melted in overflowing love and joy and humility. She clutched at the hallowed feet of the Lord who blessed her saying: "Ask for a boon."

"O merciful Lord," cried Soyarabai, "Let me taste of the leavings of your plate."

Panduranga gave her a few grains of rice with his own hands and blessed her: "You will be the mother of a good son."

Chokhamela and his wife, overwhelmed with the grace of God, did get a son and named him Karmamela. He became as saintly as his parents.

In spite of these signs of concern from the Lord, Chokhamela was still not permitted entrance into the temple and had to content himself with standing at the gate, devotedly praying from a distance.

His heart bled for the holy *darshan* of his beloved Vithala, so much so that one night the Lord came himself to Chokha's house, and led him by the hand, taking him into the holy of holies and there blessed him with the sight he had so much longed for.

The horrified priest, recognising Chokha's voice in the altar room, rushed at him shouting: "The temple has been defiled!" and pushing him out, dragged him all the way across the river Bhima and left him on the other bank with warnings of further penalties should he try to sneak into the temple another time.

Chokha cried to God: "Alas, O Lord, I am only a dog at your door, don't send me away to other men's

doors." But his insight was clear and his mind tranquil as he sang: "The real Pandhari is in my own body and my soul is the Lord Vithala within!"

At another time, God gave Chokhamela his jewel — a necklace. When the priests found this out, they beat Chokhamela mercilessly.

Chokha built in his garden a little temple to Sri Vithala, and surrounded it with lamps on all sides. Vithoba, as He is affectionately called, came into the garden to partake of the feast and was lovingly served by Chokha and Soyarabai.

In her confusion, however, Soyarabai dropped a cup of curd which spattered the *pitamber* (yellow cloth) of the Lord. Vithoba smiled and reassured the penitent woman. Then a crow sat on a branch above Sri Vithal and Chokha beseeched it to fly away elsewhere.

The invitees who had come for the feast of the Lord at the consecration of Chokha's little temple were filled with wonder. But the priest wanted to ascertain the truth of the unusual goings on, feeling that the happenings were wild fancies of Chokhamela's imagination and daring arrogance on his part to pretend that someone dressed in the likeness of Panduranga was actually the Lord, partaking of food in an untouchable's house!

Excited with anger, the priest came up to Chokhamela and administered a furious slap on his cheek and then went to purify himself with a dip in the Chandrabhaga.

Returning to his duties in the temple after having "settled" that braggart of an untouchable, can one imagine his stupefaction at seeing the murti (idol)

of Panduranga displaying a swollen cheek and the *pitamber* stained with curd?

Struck to his heart with repentance, he hastened to Chokha's house, fell at his feet and begged him forgiveness for his rashness and stupidity. He himself led Chokhamela by the hand and brought him into the inner sanctum, to talk and pray to the blissful Lord as long as he wished.

All the saints of the time were very fond of Chokhamela and his family. He accompanied the great saint Jnaneshwar and Nama Deva in their northern pilgrimage and his songs are the pride of the *Varkaris* (pilgrims).

Soon afterwards, Chokhamela and other Mahars got accidentally buried under a wall in a construction site. It took days to recover the bodies which had been badly mangled up, so badly in fact that none was recognisable.

The Saint Nama Deva was approached and he said simply: "Those bones which emit the constant sound of "Vithala, Vithala" are of Chokha."

They found them in this way and buried them under the main gate of the sacred temple of Panduranga. Chokha's whole life, to his breath and bones, was attuned to the holy name and so even the cells of his remains continued repeating the name that was the solace of his soul.

His brother-in-law Bamka said Chokha was a disciple of Nama Deva. The Abhangas left by the whole family are still prized by the *Varkaris* for their sweetness, humility and infinite love of God. Chokha died in 1295.

His little sister Nirmala lived in a next-door

village of Mehimpur and was herself a great devotee of God. Her husband Bamka also accompanied the saints in their northern pilgrimage and he died in 1318.

NARHARI SONAR

In the Maharashtra of seven centuries ago, lived a goldsmith in the peaceful kingdom of Devagiri, or Devagadh, ruled by the good king Ramadevarao.

Narhari, who was a trusted and able jeweller, came and settled in Pandharpur, the holy city of Lord Vithala or Panduranga (Krishna).

While the city and the whole of Maharashtra abounded in saints dedicated to the love of God in the form of Vithala, Narhari, who thought Shiva and Vishnu were different, remained exclusively apart, worshipping Shankar. He considered Vishnu as an inferior.

The saints who formed themselves into a congregation known as the Vithala Sampradaya and called themselves Varkaris or pilgrims, were on the contrary a fully enlightened body and saw no difference between one name or aspect of God and another, which were all interpretations of the same Infinite Oneness. The one Infinite Bliss, with form or without form—and as many names as devotees chose to use.

Saint Pundalika, who some centuries earlier had brought the sacred image of the Lord Panduranga to Pandharpur, was himself a Shiva worshipper who had equal devotion to the Lord Vishnu. Panduranga means “white-bodied” and describes Shiva, not Krishna, yet that is the name attributed to the Vishnu of Pandharpur. The sculptor had also thoughtfully

placed a Shivalinga on the head of Krishna.

The varkaris loved their Vithala as they would a near and dear one; as if like a constant friend he was always with them. They sang and danced in joy, led by the great saints Jnaneshwar and Nama Deva, who created such mass kirtanas where all voices called on the blessed name of the Lord, and produced a roar of joy which echoed all over the land.

A Sawakar (Landlord) came to Narhari's shop one day with a request that he fashion a ‘*kargota*’ or middle belt of silver for the deity Shri Vithala. Narhari agreed, provided he did not have to go to the temple for measurements. “Please, Sir, kindly take the measurements yourself and bring them to me. I shall get the *kargota* ready to your entire satisfaction.”

The Sawakar brought the measurements and the *kargota* was ready in time.

However, when the Sawakar tried to fit it on the Lord of Pandhari, it was found to be a little tight. So he went back to Narhari and asked him to go and measure the Deity himself. The goldsmith refused saying that he never would set eyes on any Vishnu image and didn't intend doing so even to oblige the Sawakar. But the latter did not give up and begged Narhari, offering a compromise which would allow him to take measurements without looking at the *murti*. Narhari was a good man and thought it wise to accept and follow his advice.

So they tied a bandage over his eyes and led him gently into the temple's interior and helped place his hands on the *murti*.

Narhari began taking the measurements. But as

his fingers rolled over the contours of the image, he found to his astonishment that he touched not a Vishnu image but that of Shankar. There was the five-faced God, with the matted hair on his head; there was no mistake, this was Shiva and not Vishnu.

Narhari tore away the bandage and looked hard at the *murti*; but what was he seeing? There was that despicable Vishnu standing before him. Was his sight deceiving him or was it his sense of touch? He again put on the cloth over his eyes and touched the *murti* all over. Once more, he could not be wrong, for this was the image of his beloved Shankar.

At last Narhari's eyes opened and he threw the cloth away. How could he have been so blind as to think one God different from the other!

"O Vithala!" he cried in utter humility, "Accept me as Thy own!" And he fell at the feet of the smiling Lord.

He was a disciple of Gaibininath and from then on progressed spiritually, guided by Jnaneshwar who taught him the esoteric knowledge of the Self. He cast off completely his ideas of differentiation. The unreality of the world struck him as he sang "The world is like a picture drawn on a wall."

His trade became his temple. His hammer hit and broke the pieces of anger and passion. Gold was his soul being pounded into his body whereas the gold cleansing liquid was God. Narhari rose above the relative feelings of duality and merged into the infinite Oneness, and became one of the great saints in the wake of Jnaneshwar and Nama Deva, Gora the potter, Sawata the gardener and Chokha the untouchable. His *abhangas* are still sung and cherished all over

Maharashtra. He too attended the pilgrimage of Jnaneshwar and Nama Deva to the north and was present at Jnaneshwar's Mahasamadhi. He died in 1313.

GORA KUMBHAR

Seven centuries ago, in the days when Maharashtra was flooded with countless saints and devotees whose religious songs still echo in that blessed land, a fervent devotee of Vithala (Krishna) was born in a potter's family in Teradhoki, in 1267.

He was three years older than Saint Nama Deva and eight years senior to the child sage and yogi Jnaneshwar.

Gora Kumbhar enjoyed the mixing of clay under his feet for his hands were free to keep the *tal* while he sang in all the directions the blessed name of God. Therefore, he remained dancing, clapping and singing, unmindful of the march of time, of his work or his own.

God was blissful and merciful and Gora Kumbhar forgot his own body and let his soul embrace the sky where happiness met with Bliss.

He taught also Nama Deva, as did Nama Deva's Guru, that God manifests in all creatures and all things and that there is no difference between God and he, or between themselves once they realised their true selves.

Then one day as he had gone mad with the joy of the Name, a terrible thing happened. His wife had to go to the river to fetch water, so she let their little son play in the shade not far from where Gora was trampling the clay and singing to his heart's content.

The baby crawled towards his father and trying to touch him, got himself trampled to death in the mound of clay. Gora never noticed anything, immersed as he was in the ecstasy of the holy Name.

The child's mother, having brought the pitchers of water, began to search for her child and anxiety gripped her heart as she ran towards her husband and noticed the clay mixed with blood. Seized with terror, she abused him and lost her senses in anger and sorrow.

Gora was appalled when he realised what had happened, and tried to comfort her. But the mother was past comfort. She screamed at him: "Cursed be your *abhangas* and cursed your Vithala. I swear by his name that you will never touch me again!"

As days passed, Gora's wife repented for her curse but Gora had sworn he would never touch her. They were left without issue and so the distressed woman brought her husband to her father's home and arranged for him to marry her younger sister Rama.

"Take her," said the father, "and treat her exactly as you treat your first wife, her sister."

"Indeed, I shall," said Gora and he didn't touch her either.

The sisters were dejected and thought of a plan to cause him to break his vow. They placed his hands while he slept so that they touched their sides and woke him up to show him that since he had forsaken his vow, he should now resume the normal life of a householder. But Gora who never told an untruth, was horrified and chopped his fingers away.

As a last resort and in desperation, the sisters and their husband finally decided to place the case before

Shri Vithala in Pandharpur, at the time of the special and auspicious Ekadashi.

No sooner did he enter the sacred temple than Gora felt enveloped by the grace and bounty of the blissful Lord Panduranga. He forgot his miseries and sang loud and clear with all the others, beating the *tal* with his mutilated hands.

Nama Deva was conducting the *kirtan* with all the saints and devotees present. Jnaneshwar and Nama Deva who were the leading saints of the time increased their fervour and the clamour rose louder and louder till the whole temple vibrated with the sound of Hari.

Gora humbly prayed: "You are O Lord, all that I am left with. You are my only support, my everything! Where else shall I turn but to you?"

All the saints secretly prayed for Gora in their hearts and the sound of the *kirtan* would have silenced the trumpeting of a herd of elephants.

Nama Deva accelerated the tempo: "Hari Vithala, Vithala, Panduranga!" Then all forgot their troubles, they dismissed the world as ephemeral and trampled on illusions. They saw only their beloved Vithala, their ever-present Lord, the True Self of their selves who filled the universe within Himself.

Tears coursed down their cheeks, beatific smiles lit their upturned faces. "Hari, Vithala, Vithala, Panduranga!" Then a cry rose in the audience of participants. Gora's hands were whole again!

"O blessed Lord, ever merciful!" they cried and Nama Deva led the *kirtan* again in full force, with the joy of their overflowing hearts.

Gora's wife now prayed to Vithala: "Show us

what we should do, O Lord, have mercy on my bereaved heart!"

Panduranga showed His grace by producing her dead child who came crawling and alive from the altar towards his mother. She ran to him with outstretched arms: "O my darling, O my child!" She embraced him and lifted him to her tear-drenched bosom.

With a heart filled with gratefulness, Gora spent his days in singing the Lord's name and dancing in ecstasy. He reached the heights of realisation in which he saw and felt the oneness infinite of creation in God (Brahman).

He had true realisation, for, like all those who have reached that state, like Jnaneshwar and his brothers and sister, like Nama Deva and Visoba Khechara or like Sawata the gardener, he was unable to describe that state.

A devotee cannot describe the bliss of Brahman "just as a dumb man cannot express the sweetness of the sugar he is tasting," said Goroba who was also affectionately called Goroba Kaka (uncle).

Gora accompanied Jnaneshwar and other saints on their pilgrimage to the north and later was present at the *Mahasamadhi* of Jnaneshwar.

RAKA KUMBHAR

The kiln was ready, all the earthen pots had been neatly placed in rows upon rows and Raka Kumbhar painstakingly lit the fire and stoked it well. As the fire blazed he shut and sealed the door and let the heat do the job of baking the pots.

After some time, Raka, hearing persistent mews and "miaos" around the kiln, went to see what was amiss.

To his surprise and horror, he saw a she-cat running hither and thither round and round the oven, with eyes wide in terror and calling on helplessly so that Raka understood that, unknown to him, she had left her litter of kittens in the interior of the brick oven.

By now the fire was roaring in full blaze. It was impossible to put it out at this stage and Raka thought of Panduranga.

"O Pandharinath, come running to save the kittens as you ran to the help of the Pandavas. Save them as you saved Prahlad from the fire. O Lord, I promise to take the vow of renunciation if you kindly spare their lives."

Raka was one of the numerous saints and devotees who took birth in the land of Maharashtra, seven centuries ago. A contemporary of Jnaneshwar, Nama Deva and Gora the potter-saint, his heart melted with compassion for all creatures.

It took three days for the fire to spend itself and the oven to cool down enough for people to break it open.

Then Raka with the help of neighbours tore at the bricks and retrieved all his pots fully baked, without an exception, whereas the little kittens came out unharmed and alive, playing mischievously as little cats do! They rushed to their waiting mother who licked them, smelled them and purred with pleasure.

Crowds had collected to witness the miracle and true to his word, Raka in gratefulness forsook the world then and there and distributed his possessions to the needy and took to a life of renunciation.

His wife, Bamka, had gone one day to the river to bathe and met there Nama Deva's daughter washing clothes.

"Careful," said Bamka, "the spray of your washing might fall on me."

Nama Deva's daughter was piqued and retorted that it mattered little since Bamka belonged to the caste of potters and her husband, as everybody knew, only pretended to have renounced the world, but hadn't really done so.

Bamka took offence and with tears in her eyes, called God as a witness to her husband's sincerity. She cried "Let Panduranga come and vindicate Raka!"

The news that Bamka had called on God's presence spread like wildfire along the river bank.

Raka came, followed by their daughter Vanka and by Saint Nama Deva.

Nama Deva asked Panduranga to show them whether Raka had truly renounced the world.

Goddess Rukmini appeared and hid a golden

bangle under the pile of wood which Raka had placed on the steps of the ghat, unknown to him and withdrew from sight.

And while people were still arguing about him, Raka picked up his faggot of branches and saw the golden bangle which the Goddess had hidden there.

He promptly threw it into the Chandrabhaga river saying, "Why such temptations!" and was about to leave again.

But Nama Deva prayed to Shri Vithala, "I bow to your hallowed feet, O Lord, now bless and embrace this true devotee of yours and his wife and daughter."

Panduranga embraced all the three who fell at his feet with tears of joy.

"Ah," said Nama Deva, "just as in hot weather we seek the cool shade of a tree, so Rakhumai (Rukmini) shelters us when in trouble."

SANTAJI PAWAR

During the great wave of religious devotion which swept over Maharashtra, in the days of Saint Jnaneshwar and Nama Deva, there lived in the Ranjana village, Santaji Pawar, a *sardar*.

Santaji was born with the name of the Lord on his lips and relished nothing more than to repeat the name of Narayana, Govinda, at all hours of the day or night. He attended *kathas* and lectures on philosophy and was completely detached from worldly concerns.

It seemed to him that the world was the greatest hindrance to spiritual progress, for, he was convinced that the world was a transitory creation bound for destruction whereas Vithala's name, the indestructible Sea of Bliss was the only solace of the Bhaktas lost in this maze of *samsar*.

Following his desire to devote his life to the search for Truth and renounce the world in order to follow the hard disciplines of such *sadhana*, he placed his head on his mother's feet, seeking her blessings for the fulfilment of his resolve. Trying to deter him, she asked:

"Why leave the world, my son?—What has it done to you that you must forsake it? What will you gain thereby, tell me?"

"No, no, mother", cried Santaji, "Don't give me the world, it is evil and mad. Enough of it! O Mother,

how shall I describe to you the sweetness of Hari's name? Let me henceforth drink the nectar of the holy Name and gain peace of mind. Bless me, O Mother, that I may realise God!"

On these words, Santaji renounced all and left for the woods.

Singing God's name as he went, he felt peace in solitude. As the rays of the sun danced between the leaves and trunks of the great trees and touched the floor of the forest with light, he felt the grace of God inundate his heart. "O Lord, don't give me the world full of deceit and sufferings where people get caught like fish in a net. O Vithala, save me from the world! Thou art my Ocean of Mercy, let my mind always find peace in Thee!"

Santaji's wife was shocked by his momentous decision to abandon her and his home. She could not understand why he had to go away as if in revulsion of them all. Had they not always cared for him lovingly? Kanta was a good woman and forthwith decided to join her fate with that of her husband, come what may!

She ran towards the jungle and deep into the forest, and wandered until she came upon her husband peacefully meditating under a tree. She fell at his feet and beseeched him: "Take me with you, my Lord, have mercy and show me the way. Make my mind tranquil in the Bliss that you have attained!"

Santaji sighed. Was this the way the Lord granted him renunciation? Did the world he had cast off like a moulting snake's slough, have to hunt him down in this refuge?

Kanta began to cry: "O Lord, I shall serve you wherever you go. Why should you discard me so? As a fish cannot live out of water, so am I unable to go on without you! I too do not care for this world full of miseries, my soul suffers torment like a fish out of its element; please let me serve you and let Rama Nama be my nectar. Fulfil, out of pity, my desire!"

Santaji looked at her, her face lit by the streams of tears coursing down and her eyes humbly yearning for his consent.

"Let us enjoy the bliss of the Name together, as dawn meets day and as Ganga flows to the sea, let us both be drawn to God-realisation together!" she entreated.

"Don't follow me!" cried Santaji, "You will never be able to bear the hardships of renunciation. You'll have to give up such frivolities as costly clothes and ornaments, and above all, the evils of lust and pride. Take the name of Govinda and you will be ready to renounce. You should not worry about what people say of you nor think of yourself as different from others or from God. The Lord truly abides in all things and you must realise him within your own heart."

Kanta was pleased to hear these words of wisdom. She was devoted to her husband and if he so wished to leave the world and plunge himself into the search for Self-realisation, well, she would help him and join him in renouncing it herself.

She threw away her ornaments and fancy trimmings of her clothing, touched her husband's feet and said, "Bless me and may we reach the Goal together!"

"So be it." acquiesced Santaji.

Instructed by Santaji, she progressed steadfastly in meditation and they would sing together Vithala's name with all their devotion and fervour.

Santaji told Kanta one morning "Let us beg for *madhukari* (food gifted from many houses) quickly. There's a village across the Bhima. The water isn't high and you may cross it and beg in that town. Take whatever is given to you, and accept it gratefully with Hari's name."

Kanta reached the village and was there recognised by her *nhanand* (husband's sister), who couldn't believe her eyes to see her beautiful sister-in-law knocking at her door for alms.

"My God!" she exclaimed, "What made you renounce the world and become a mendicant? What happened to your husband and the family? What of all your possessions? Why are you reduced to begging? What sorrows caused this?"

"No," answered Kanta, "we are happy to be rid of the maze of *samsar*. There is infinite sweetness and joy in the blessed name of God. My husband received the divine Grace and I humbly serve him. How can I ever express the ineffable bliss of the Name?"

The sister-in-law was touched at heart and said kindly. "Eat here and take it as *madhukari*," and she quietly dropped two *puris* in the cloth bag of Kanta.

When Santaji's wife tried to return, black clouds hovered everywhere and rain was lashing the land like falling maces. The river had swelled beyond proportion. How was she to cross over to her waiting husband? "O Hrishiksha, show me the ways to go to him," she prayed with great fervour.

The Lord heard her prayer and soon, to Kanta's great relief, a Koli (fisherman) approached her saying: "Mother, come to my boat I shall take you across."

When Kanta stepped ashore, the Koli disappeared and she ran to her husband and fell at his feet. "Here is the *madhukari*, my Lord," she said and spread before him the food she had begged at the village.

"How did you manage to cross?" asked Santaji in surprise.

"The Koli rowed me across."

"Ah, how fortunate! That Koli, dear soul, was Panduranga, the Lord Narayana himself! Alas," he cried, tears welling up in his eyes, "the Blissful Lord came to you and you didn't recognise him and I who call on him day in and day out, never even saw him!"

Santaji's sorrow filled his heart and he could not eat, as he reflected thus: "Why hadn't God blessed him whose mind never wavered from his lotus feet?" His yearning for God rose in him like a burning fever which not even his profuse tears could mitigate. He would not eat, nor rise until the beloved Lord of his heart blessed him with his presence.

Panduranga's ways are unpredictable and it was to a *vani* (grocer) in a nearby village that he appeared, ordering him to prepare forthwith a good meal for his devotee. Obeying his instructions, the *vani* cooked a meal and took it into the forest where he found Santaji seated under a tree and crying inwardly "O Lord, come to me!" He told him about his dream and how he came on orders of Shri Vithala to give him a good and wholesome meal in the forest.

But Santaji's tears flowed anew. "You too saw the Lord, and I haven't!"

Kanta and the *vani* began to feed him with their own hands as he sat motionless, overwhelmed with longing for the *darshan* of God. "I am a sinner, O Lord, I take refuge in Thee! All I desire is to see thy blissful face, just once!"

Then Narayan, merciful as ever to his sincere devotees, stood revealed before him, smiling at his beloved child. He lifted Santaji and Kanta and embraced them both. "Ask," he said, "whatever you wish, I shall grant it."

But they both had no wish except to see him, love him and serve him. Seeing they were free of attachment, the Lord blessed them:

"Eat now, do not fear. I shall always be with you. Accept *madhukari*, for, food begged thus is pure and remember Me in your hearts all the time."

"Yes," said Nama Deva, the great saint of Pandharpur and devotee of Vithala, "God takes so many forms to save his children." When the famous *Eka-dashi yatra* of Pandharpur took place, thousands of devotees were unable to cross the river in spate, so like the Koli for Santaji and his wife, God took the form of a giant tortoise and ferried them across. So all could join in the enthusiastic *kirtanas* of the temple of Vithala.

SANT JANAJASAWANTA

In Namadeva's time, there lived a saint named Janajasawanta who was so imbued with the presence of God that he could see nothing else. To him as others of his time, God permeated all things and so Vithala who loves His devotees entered his humble abode as a servant. "Put me on to anything," asked the Lord of his devotee, "all I require in payment is just my keep."

The fortunate home prospered as Vithala's influence filled it, and all the work was despatched by him with the greatest ease. As Namadeva wisely remarked: "Good doubles the good and so his work increased and produced plenty."

Whether God laboured in the fields or carried heavy loads of firewood from the forest, Janajasawanta saw Him around him wherever he went. His heart melted with tenderness for his beloved Helpmate: "Vithala is carrying my plough!" he sang in ecstasy.

Vithala indeed worked as no servant would ever have done. He drew endless buckets of water from the well, watered the fields and carrying their young ones on his shoulders, he escorted the saint's wife, daughters and daughters-in-law home from distant villages. He left no work undone.

"Oh, how shall I describe it?" cried the over-

whelmed Janajasawanta, "Vitho is my sole Care-taker!"

So concluded Namadeva to all who heard him while watching the perfect team of God and his faithful devotee: "Now remember O my friends, always remember!"

JAGAMITRA NAGA

Jagamitra Naga was a humble, kind-hearted Brahmin who lived on alms and devoted all his time to singing *kirtans* with great joy. He was born in Parli Vaijanath in the year 1330. Jagamitra was content with whatever he got by begging and seeing Vasudeva in all things. He treated joy and suffering alike and never felt separate from God. Therefore the villagers respected him and loved him.

Some miscreants, envious of his popularity, contrived to set fire to his house in the middle of the night. People came running when the blaze was already consuming everything. With tears in their eyes and shielding their faces from the furnace-like heat they prayed to Panduranga (Krishna), "O Lord, why did you allow this to happen to such a good soul as Naga?" They pleaded with God to save Naga even as He had saved Prahlad and the Pandavas. "O Panduranga, Vithala, this is the time to protect your devotee!"

The next moment the fire was brought under control. And lo! Out of the maze of burnt beams and pillars, came Jagamitra, unscathed. A roar of joy greeted him from the assembled villagers. They took up with him a *kirtan* in thanks to their Lord Panduranga.

The village headman conferred with other notables.

"We should show our gratitude to Jagamitra for

having blessed our village with his great devotion to Shri Vithala. Besides, he is now being made destitute by the fire. Let us give him a small piece of land so that he may not have to go begging every day and may carry on his *kirtans* undisturbed."

They unanimously agreed and the deed was signed and the land transferred to Jagamitra Naga. But Jagamitra who never thought about worldly things, did not go near the land, leave alone cultivate it.

So the kindly villagers went and tilled it for him and gave him the produce. Jagamitra, seeing God always in all things, remained contented.

It so happened that a bigoted "Amaldar" (official) came and made his residence in Parli Vaijanath. He immediately resented Jagamitra's place of honour among the people of the village and coveted his bit of land.

"This belongs to a great devotee of Hari", said the villagers, "it is not right that you should try and deprive him of it." They endeavoured to impress upon him that Jagamitra was no ordinary saint for he truly saw God everywhere.

"Let me see," said the Amaldar who by now had become a Subedar. He sent for Jagamitra and told him: "Tomorrow is the day of my daughter's wedding. It is our custom to keep a live tiger nearby during the ceremony and you are going to get me that tiger today, or else I confiscate all that you have, understand?"

"Yes", said Jagamitra, and left for the woods.

As he penetrated into the deep forest abounding in beasts of prey, Jagamitra thought about his Lord Narayana. "Thou art in all things, O Lord, in every-

thing!" Then he remembered that he was to catch a tiger. What a strange and unusual form of God was required by the Subedar! Why a tiger? Well then God would be coming to him in the form of a tiger.

In fact a savage roar at that instant shook the jungle and Jagamitra caught a glimpse of the huge shape of a tiger, slithering behind bushes and trees and he called, "Come, O my Lord, come in the form of the tiger and let me take you to the Subedar's house. Come, O Panduranga."

The great beast in one bound was before Jagamitra, touching him and growling affectionately. Jagamitra embraced the tiger. "O Panduranga, let us go!" The tiger allowed him to tie his upper cloth round its neck and followed him meekly.

At the entrance to the village, the tiger gave a fierce roar which sent everybody scuttling indoors and made them secure their doors and windows. The Subedar ran and hid himself in the innermost room of his house, shivering like a leaf in a strong wind. The tiger roared once more and all the tightly secured doors and windows flew open by themselves. Jagamitra reassured all, saying: "Fear not, take God's name and all will be well!" Then he called the Subedar.

"Come out, O Subedar, my friend, your tiger has arrived! Now show us the stable you want us to keep him in!"

But none answered him. The tiger broke open a door with his head and roared into the house, sending the cowering Subedar into a frenzy of fear in the inner room. The panicky servants shaking with fear, managed to tell Jagamitra that the Subedar had fled

to the temple. Jagamitra and the tiger stepped into the room and found the Subedar locked behind another door.

In a faint voice, he pleaded with Jagamitra to spare his life: "I am an accursed sinner, forgive my pride and the offence I caused you. Remove that tiger and I shall never give you cause to regret it. I take refuge at your feet," he added meekly.

The tiger roared as if to pounce on his prey but Jagamitra restrained him and said gently: "Come on now, let us go back to the forests, my Lord." And he walked beside him into the jungle. The tiger disappeared and with a heart overflowing with love, Jagamitra fell at the feet of the Lord who embraced him.

"The Lord's devotee has won over the Subedar," said the villagers." Has Hari ever forsaken his dear ones?" they added wistfully.

Jagamitra left many beautiful *abhangas* and took Mahasamadhi in Parli, in 1380.

SENA NHAVI

Sena's wife answered the persistent knocking at her door. "Where is the master-barber?"

"He has gone out," she said. "Why, is he wanted by the King?"

"He is, and urgently. Could you tell me where I may find him?"

"I have not the faintest idea. He might have gone on a call outside."

The man left and she cautiously shut her door and locked it.

Sena was at the time meditating in his puja room. To shield him from outside interferences, she had lied to the soldier of the King.

It might have been the year 1448. The Muslims had conquered parts of Maharashtra and a King lived in Bidar (Vidarbha), in whose service was Sena, the barber.

When not needed at the palace, Sena sang *bhajans* and led *kirtans* as he was in incessant communion with Panduranga (Krishna), just as so many other saints of his times and of the last two centuries had done.

Now, at the palace, a mischief-monger hearing the messenger's report to the King, said: "Your Highness, you should not believe what the barber's wife told your messenger, for Sena never leaves his house at this time of the morning. He sits in meditation in

a special worship room and I know he was there to-day."

Hearing this, the King got enraged and ordered his soldiers to go and drown the barber in the river.

But then, at that very moment, a guard's man announced to the King that Sena the barber had arrived with all his paraphernalia, to shave him.

The King was nonplussed and cancelled the order he had given to his soldiers. Somehow, looking at Sena, he felt completely pacified.

Sena began doing his job and shampooed first the head of the King.

In front of the King was a small cup full of oil and in it he could see his barber's person neatly reflected but with a difference. Strangely enough, the reflection looked very much like one of those idols of Krishna with four arms. He looked back at Sena but found him to be his normal self. Yet, every time he gazed at the oil cup he saw the four-armed Krishna, radiant with his discus, conch, mace and lotus.

Well pleased with Sena, the King gave him a potful of riches and dismissed him. The strange double of Sena reached his home where he deposited the pot of gold and disappeared.

In the afternoon, the King again sent for his barber. And Sena hastened away to the palace. He shaved and shampooed the King, but this time the royal personage did not perceive the Vishnu image in the cup of oil, and he asked a little piqued: "How come I don't see what you showed me this morning in the cup of oil?"

"Your Highness?" asked Sena baffled to say the least.

"You know, the reflection you caused to appear in that cup of oil?"

Sena couldn't understand what he was talking about, but by cautious questioning, he came to know the truth and realised how Panduranga had saved his life by coming to shave the King in his place.

But what was he to do now? He prayed to his beloved Lord and by the grace of God, the King was able to see Krishna in the reflection again.

Sena was as sharp in his discrimination as he was with the razor. Shaving meant for him preparing the soul to meet the Lord.

The mirror was where you saw yourself and could discriminate the real from the unreal. With pinches on the skin, he would awaken dispassion. He rubbed the head with the water of peace and swiftly removed the hair and the nails of passion.

He taught all, that it was not necessary to retire to the jungle or a deep forest to realise God.

He was always merciful and Sena said again and again in his beautiful *abhangas*: "Blessed am I that I have seen Your feet!"

KANHOPATRA

Kanhopatra was the beautiful daughter of a dancing girl of Mangalvedhya — the home town of great saints like Chokhamela and others, whose sacred lives had blessed the village some two centuries earlier. It was also the place of another saint, Damaji.

The fame of her exquisite and perfect features and beauty spread in the kingdom of the Muslim King of Bidar (Vidarbha). He therefore sent her an invitation to come to his court where he would most certainly honour her and smother her with gifts and perhaps make her his senior concubine.

Kanhopatra did not respond. She had been finding men much insignificant beings compared to God. She wouldn't for anything trade the Lord for them and decided instead to look up to God for enlightenment, joy and happiness.

As the time for the sacred Ekadashi festival of Pandharpur approached, bands of devotees were passing through the village, beating the *mridanga* and cymbals and singing the saints' *abhangas*.

Kanhopatra was impressed and bowed low to them and asked: "Where are you bound for?"

"We are going to Pandharpur," they said, eyes sparkling with excitement, "to the blessed feet of Panduranga!"

Kanhopatra asked them to describe Panduranga and the *Varkaris* (pilgrims) began to sing the praises

of the Lord. "Why don't you join us and come along?" they asked her, smiling encouragingly.

"Supposing I came with you," she asked with some hesitation, "will your Panduranga accept me?"

"Can there be any doubt about it?" They answered unanimously. "Our Panduranga thirsts only for pure devotion. He loves nothing more than *Bhakti*."

Kanhopatra felt herself drawn to Pandharpur like a piece of iron flying to a powerful magnet. She persuaded her mother to accompany her to the holy city.

When they reached the city's temple, Kanhopatra fell prostrate at the feet of Panduranga and wept with joy. Here was the Goal of her life, the end of her search.

No petty human, she decided, be he a king or a Brahmin, would lord over her life. She had chosen Panduranga or Vithala, as her Lord and there she would remain, spending nearly all her days at the temple.

She composed many beautiful *abhangas* that are moving with their deep sentiments of love for God and at the same time, gems of literature.

"Happy am I to have seen your feet!" she would sing in rapture, "having renounced all trace of worldliness forever."

The news of Kanhopatra's beauty and of her having renounced the world soon spread to the court of the King of Bidar where a Pandharpur householder sang her praises.

The King remembering her earlier refusal to come to him felt piqued, as his desire to possess her

reasserted itself. He called a guardsman and gave him orders to bring Kanhopatra, by force if necessary, to his court.

Hearing that soldiers were seen looking for her in the city, Kanhopatra fled to the inner shrine of the temple and fell at Panduranga's feet, trembling like a doe hunted by relentless men seeking her end.

Meanwhile the soldiers had reached the temple's gate and called upon her to come out and follow them, "for," they warned, "if you don't, we shall have to carry you away by force!"

"Let me take leave of Pandarinath," cried Kanhopatra from the altar in the temple, "do wait outside!"

The men waited, then she threw herself at the mercy of Panduranga. Was it right that He who owned her body and soul, should abandon her to those ignoble men? "Take me O Lord, take me now and relieve me from the evils of this world! Make me thine!"

She sang her last *abhangas*: "O Lord of the fallen. Why dost thou torment thy devotees so? They are O Lord, but your other form. Who else, O Pandarinath, is there to go to? Alas, who is to blame if the jackal has taken the share of the lion? Kanhopatra says, take me from my body which I offer at thy feet!"

God accepted her and her body fell lifeless at the foot of the altar. A smile of bliss on her lips, she seemed like a child for whom the gates of Home had opened after a long time of foolish wandering. Now she truly was home at last!

They buried her body near the Southern Gate of the temple and a strange tree sprang there which no

one had seen before. In fact it is still there now, for anyone to see.

Panduranga's great devotee is remembered thus and by the rhythm and beauty of her *abhangas*.

BHANUDAS

Long ago, when the saints of Maharashtra congregated in Pandharpur to hold Hari Katha and Kirtans in the sacred temple of Vithala, their ecstatic chants of the Holy Name sounded like a gigantic roar of joy.

With tears in their eyes and beatific smiles on their faces, they danced, and sang in one voice, fully relishing the sweetness of the Name of God.

They could go on in this way for days and nights without a break and without feeling the slightest exhaustion. They were in fact most reluctant to end the performance.

These extraordinary Kirtans took place regularly, as they do even today, on every Ekadashi and other auspicious days.

Great was the consternation therefore, when one day, the devotees were unable to see the Murti.

"Where has our beloved Panduranga gone? Why has he left us?" They inquired of one another.

Everyone felt dejected, so that Bhanudas, a great devotee of the Lord, resolved to go out in search of the Deity.

Born in 1448, at Pratistana or Paithana, he was to be the great grandfather of the famous saint Eknath.

Bhanudas had an independent nature; when barely ten years old, he resented a reprimand from his

father and ran away from home to hide himself in a jungle cave temple where he lived for seven days.

An unknown Brahmin brought him daily a cup of milk for his subsistence and he thus spent his time praying to the Lord in the form of the Sun whose temple it was.

A Brahmin villager observing him one day coming out of the cave, informed his father who hurried to the spot and found his son sleeping with his head resting on the feet of the Lord. This is why he became known as Bhanudas (servant and worshipper of the Sun.)

After much persuasion, he was brought back home. Some time later they got him married and soon afterwards he lost both his parents. Responsibilities lay heavy on his head, but since he was always immersed in Kirtans and Bhajans, his household suffered and his wife and children were on the brink of starvation.

Seeing their precarious condition, the town elders decided to help them and gave him cloth worth Rs. 100 and told him to go out and start a business in selling cloth, so that he might support himself and his family.

His business prospered so well that other merchants became jealous and were just waiting for an opportunity to do him down in some way or another.

The occasion presented itself one night, when all the merchants, having covered many miles on horseback, reached the town at dusk and decided to rest for the night at a Dharamsala.

Bhanudas whose mind was fixed on the Lord, got attracted by the sweet sounds of a Kirtan and asking

the other merchants to keep a watch over his merchandise, left for the Kirtan.

The merchants unanimously agreed to throw away his cloth bales down a ravine and let loose his horse. But as they were busy trying to ruin their companion, a band of robbers attacked the Dharamsala, beat the merchants and left with all their possessions.

When Bhanudas returned from the Kirtan he found his colleagues sitting forlorn and shamefacedly and they told him what happened.

Bhanudas's cloth was recovered and his horse had come back and was waiting for him, but good-hearted as he was, and always seeing God in all things, he distributed the cloth among the other businessmen and with whatever little was left, he went home and subsisted somehow, constantly singing about the Lord, thinking about Him and seeing Him in everything.

When the King of Vijayanagar, Ramadevarao, had come to Pandharpur, he found the Murti so appealing that he felt a pang of anxiety as he thought of the danger of Muslim marauders, prevalent at the time, who vandalised and pillaged whatever they saw of beauty or religious significance. So, he decided to remove the statue to Vijayanagar, (some say Hampi) safe from sacrilegious hands.

Bhanudas duly reached Vijayanagar and found there his lost Panduranga. The Murti was locked inside the inner shrine, well out of his reach. With touching prayers, Bhanudas persuaded the Lord to return to Pandharpur.

The locks opened by themselves and Lord Vithala

came out. Bhanudas fell at his feet and the Lord embraced him lovingly. He placed his garland round Bhanudas's neck and told him to be patient and wait until another day.

In the morning, the priests found the golden necklace of Vithala missing from the Murti. They alerted the city and the King's men spread in all directions, until they traced and caught Bhanudas wearing the same. The King immediately sentenced him to die on the Sula, (a sharp pointed pillar on which he was to be impaled and die).

Bhanudas cried in anguish. Had his Lord deserted him? Was he to meet his death without a single glimpse of Him?

Whether He let him live or die, Bhanudas would not give Him up, and so let the world explode, his Vithala was still his own.

He threw back his head and sang with all his heart the soul-stirring verse:—

*"Were the skies above to burst
The whole creation to break apart
And the undersea fire to devour the three worlds,
Even then shall I never cease to yearn for Thee,
my Vithala!"*

As the soldiers were hurrying him, they reached the base of the Sula and told the executioners to make haste.

Bhanudas seemed to see nothing but his beloved Lord. The whole universe was permeated by Him and what was the Sula but a manifestation of his Lord Vithala?

Bhanudas closed his eyes and saw Panduranga

smiling before him. Bhanudas approached the Sula with joy, as if to meet a beloved.

But at that instant, just as the executioners got hold of him, the Sula became transformed into a flowering tree with fruit weighing down the branches and flowers exuding sweet fragrance which attracted innumerable bees. The onlookers' eyes opened wide in wonder.

The King fell at the feet of Bhanudas saying: "Forgive me for not recognising in you the true devotee of the Lord. Bless me O Holy One!"

The executioners and the King's men bowed down to him.

The King arranged for the Murti to be returned to Pandharpur and decided to accompany Bhanudas with a large retinue. Bhanudas blessed the King and thinking of Panduranga's love for His devotees he burst forth into a song the refrain of which was: "O my Panduranga, come now home to Pandharpur!"

Joy filled all the hearts of the *bhaktas* in Pandharpur, as the Lord came back to his usual pedestal, accompanied by his devoted servant and friend Bhanudas.

JANARDANA SWAMI

Janardana Swami, a Deshpande or Deshastha Brahmin, was born in 1504, at Chalisgaon, in the Deccan.

Apart from a thorough Brahmin education in the arts and morals of the *Sastras*, the scriptures and the practice of meditation, he learnt all about administration, the use of arms and rode a horse to perfection.

He was married, while fairly young, to two beautiful and virtuous girls. After his parents departed from this world, heavy responsibilities fell on his shoulders and his mind was more and more occupied with worldly affairs.

On one of his tours to Ankalakopa, while resting in a temple, he had the vision of Lord Dattatreya who came to him in the form of Nrisingha Saraswati, who was a great saint living in Narsobawadi near Gangapur.

Nrisingha Saraswati initiated him in the spiritual life, under the sacred Audumbara tree by the Krishna river.

He remained there some time, practising *tapas* and meditating on Dattatreya. He also composed beautiful *abhangas* full of the most sincere and dedicated devotion to God.

Returning to Chalisgaon, he settled all the affairs of the Deshpandes, and took his family along to Devagad (or Devagiri, now known as Daulatabad) which

came under the Nizam's rule from Ahmednagar.

Assaults and lawlessness, war and bloodshed were the order of the day in that area.

The Muslim King appointed Janardana as chief in charge of the fort (*killedar*), its administrator and defender, responsible for its safety.

In a short time Janardana Swami brought order and peace to the fortress. The pay of officials and menials, the smooth running of commerce and agriculture, all these resumed their efficient working order and people were contented under his administration.

He lived in Dhareshwar above Devagiri and held his *darbar* there. He always kept the *Jnaneshwari* and the *Amrut Anubhava* of Saint Jnaneshwar by his side as life companions, and used to retire into a cave where he held converse with Dattatreya in human form.

In the course of his duties he came in contact with many people and made disciples from among all castes including Muslims and Arabs. He wore a beard and his hair long as was the custom in those days. He also had his arms and coat of mail for going into battle and was prepared for all eventualities.

Since Thursdays were his days of contemplation and worship when he retired to meditate by the lonely Suryakunda, the Muslim rulers made it a weekly holiday and no work was transacted on Thursdays, out of respect and regard for Janardana Swami.

Of his three main disciples, Saint Eknath was the best known. The others were Ramajanardana and Janijanardana. Eknath who hailed from Paithana came to him in his twelfth year and served him with

unflinching devotion, and also did *tapascharya* by the lonely Suryakunda. Janijanardana who came from Bida followed his Guru to Devagiri and Ramajanardana of middle Khandesh took charge of the needs of the Swami.

Eknath accompanied Janardana Swami on a pilgrimage to Nasik where they met with a Brahmin named Chandrabodha. He was devoted to Sri Krishna and discussed with them the *Bhagavata*. It was then that Janardana Swami entreated his disciple to render the sacred book into Marathi which he began to do immediately to the delight and admiration of all.

The old Brahmin came to Devagiri and when he died, the Muslims built a memorial tomb for him. On Eknath's request the great Swami came to Paithana to join in the celebrations of Gokulashtami. He blessed his beloved disciple whose constant self-sacrifice, goodness and love had made him one of the most cherished saints of Maharashtra.

In his last days, Janardana Swami travelled extensively all over the South, visiting pilgrimage centres such as the Dhaumia Ashrama of Karavandi, Mallikarjuna and other famous places.

Sometimes, using his spiritual powers, he would travel in his spiritual body. His life was a unique example of the yogi in the midst of action. The same spirit in fact which Eknath emphasised and even surpassed in his own life.

His *abhangas* with their deep love and devotion blended in the yogi's existence like the colour and fragrance of flowers which are their attribute, and thus the yogi could combine the world's difficult duties

with the demands of the spiritual life without being attached to the former.

Whatever he did, he did with integrity, knowledge, art and the full powers of his great intelligence. His very presence used to bring peace of mind to those who came to him, to all, in all stations of life, he imparted some of his wisdom and the gift of spiritual joy.

He took Mahasamadhi in 1575.

SANT EKNATH

This is the story of a householder saint of Maharashtra, born in the 16th century in the very centre of Brahmin bigotry.

Eknath was the rare and perfect yogi who blended the ideal life of a methodical and self-disciplined householder with that of a poet and devotee and achieved complete renunciation in the midst of the world.

Avatars like Sri Krishna are known to have perfected the same, but Eknath did so mainly with his self-control and his love of God.

He adhered strictly to the same routine of life from which he never deviated. Yet, he was a man who without any hesitation gave up whatever he had perhaps treasured in tranquillity, goods or name, when anyone else needed his help.

Eknath was born probably in 1533, in Paithana, the ancient city of Pratisthana. He was the great-grandson of the renowned Saint Bhanudas: Bhanudas' son was Chakrapani and his son Suryanarayan was the father of Eknath. Eknath's mother was the godly Rukminibai. As he was the sole descendant of the family line, Chakrapani called him Eknath. In childhood they nicknamed him Ekya.

Unfortunately he lost his parents at a young age and was brought up entirely by his grandparents. They performed his *yagnopavit* (*munja*, or sacred

thread ceremony) at the age of six and taught him all the duties and practices of Brahmins including the disciplines. He contemplated, observed fasts and learnt the Vedas.

An old Shastri who used to live in their house, read him all the stories of the *Puranas* and found him to be an intelligent boy who believed strongly in recitation. At 12, he finished reading the *Bhagavata* of which he became extremely fond.

Then Eknath began to thirst for a Guru for it is said that no spiritual progress is possible without a spiritual teacher who himself has realised the Self. Now where was he to find him? And what disciplines should he follow?

Thus he sat dejectedly in a lonely Shiva temple where he had come to pray. In answer to his prayer a voice seemed to reach him from the interior of the temple: "If you go to Devagad, (Devagiri, today's Daulatabad), you will find Janardana Pant, a realised soul; he will teach you."

Eknath felt like one reprieved from a death sentence. Later he spoke about his dream to the old Puranik pundit. Then, without anyone's knowledge, he left for Devagad, taking Vithal's name all the way, and reached the fort on the third day.

Janardana Swami was in charge of the fortress; a capable, independent, shrewd and intellectual wizard who had mastered the art of yoga and a devoted follower of the cult of Dattatreya (Trimurty). It is said that he was in constant contact with the human form of the Deity in a place, well aloof from the bustle of the fort where he entered into *samadhi* daily.

When Eknath arrived, the Swami was in the wor-

ship room. Eknath went straight in and fell at his feet in *sashtanga pranam*, holding his feet in his hands: "Here are the feet of the One who would bless him, and enable him to cross the ocean of *samsar* (world), the feet of his true father and mother," and he breathed a sigh of relief and happiness.

As the boy embraced his feet, Janardana Swami raised him affectionately. He was pleased with the auspicious looks of the youth, his determination, diligence, patience and purity of heart which were writ on his clear face. He patted his back paternally and then embraced him. Eknath felt at peace.

The Swami asked: "Child, wherefrom have you come?"

"From Paithana."

"Why did you walk from so far to come here?"

"To see you, so that living under your roof I may serve you."

"But what will you gain by serving me?"

"I have full faith that in serving you I shall obtain your grace and see God."

"Whom do you have back at home? Did you inform them about your coming here?"

"I have my grandparents and I didn't tell them lest they wouldn't let me go."

Janardana Swami accepted him and took him into his house. He wondered at so much renunciation at such a young age.

Eknath who looked upon his Guru as God incarnate, served him faithfully, exerting his energies with zealous devotion. He prepared his bath, the flowers for worship and stood by during the *puja*, served his meals and shampooed his feet at night before going

to sleep. He was immersed in service and for six years never remembered his home.

Every Thursday, Janardana Swami fasted and meditated in a secluded place so that the Muslim rulers caused Thursdays to be holidays at the fort out of respect for him.

But it was a Thursday when the enemy suddenly stormed the gates of the fort. Janardana Swami was in *samadhi* while Eknath guarded the door. Seeing that pandemonium reigned, Eknath quickly made up his mind. He rushed to the room where his Guru kept his weapons and coat of mail, put on the armour on himself and rode out on the Guru's horse, reassuring the people. He dashed out of the fort and into the fray and routed the enemy without disturbing his Guru. Having re-established peace and order, he returned the arms and clothes and took back his post at Janardana Swami's door.

The Swami found out without Eknath's countenance betraying the slightest sign of excitement of the past hours and he felt well pleased and elated at the presence of mind and initiative of his disciple, his courage and humility.

At another time, Janardana Swami put him to work out his accounts. Eknath spent a whole night pouring over the accounts in search of a slight mistake of one pice. When he finally discovered it, he danced with joy. The Guru who awoke at the noise of clapping and dancing, asked him the reason of it. When he heard the cause of his jubilation, he smiled and pointed out to Eknath that with similar concentration he might find the fault in *samsar* and realise the truth and become even happier than that.

The following Friday, Janardana Swami took Eknath along to a solitary spot in the mountains, north of Devagad.

"No one ever comes here," he told his disciple, "except Shri Dattatreya. He comes in whichever form he pleases, so don't fear."

After some time, the filthy figure of a beggar in tatters appeared among the rocks and shrubs followed by a bitch. Janardana Swami ran forward to meet him and the two embraced. They sat for a while chatting together. Then the beggar gave a vessel to Eknath's Guru who promptly went and milched the bitch, after which they broke pieces of bread into the milk and started eating, while Eknath stared at them, unbelieving. The beggar motioned to Eknath to come and take the vessel and wash it at the spring.

Eknath began to feel that the strange mendicant might be the Lord in person and while he washed the vessel, he drank some water of it. Dattatreya then showed him his true form while the bitch became Kamadhenu (the cow of plenty). The Lord blessed him and embraced him and told Janardana Swami that he was fortunate in obtaining such an outstanding disciple who would in time save thousands of people.

Obedying his Guru's orders, Eknath spent a long time doing *tapascharya* on a lonely hill, meditating on Sri Krishna. A cow-herd boy who felt impressed by his uninterrupted meditation, provided him daily with a measure of milk.

Once, as the boy arrived earlier than usual, he saw Eknath deep in *samadhi* while a cobra coiled round his neck, spreading its hood like an umbrella

over his head. He screamed with terror and Eknath arose from his *samadhi*. To the boy's great relief, the cobra quietly slithered away hurting none. The Guru sensed all this and recalled Eknath.

"You have achieved all that there is to learn in spiritual life. Now is the time for you to join me on a tour of pilgrimage."

On the banks of the Godavari, they met Pundit Chandrabodha who invited them to his house. He then recited the Fourth Chapter of the *Bhagavata* in original Sanskrit with so much feeling that tears came to their eyes.

"This," said Janardana Swami to Eknath, "is what I want you to translate into Marathi verses so that ordinary people may enjoy and understand it as we do."

Eknath translated it on the spot and in such beautiful words as left the old Brahmin speechless with admiration.

Taking the Brahmin along, they visited Nasik, the Panchavati and Triambakeshwar. Janardana Swami left Eknath to complete his pilgrimage, and returned to Devagad, with the Brahmin.

Meanwhile, in Paithana, Eknath's old grandparents had been crying their eyes out at the loss of their beloved Ekya. The old Puranik had also left and returned after many years. Seeing the sad state of the old couple, he resolved to go in search of Eknath. Remembering the boy's dream as he had related it to him, he reached Devagad and met Janardana Swami. From him he obtained a letter for the old ones saying that Eknath would soon be back in their midst.

Eknath visited all the sacred rivers and shrines in Bharata, up to Badarinath. He finally reached Paithana where he stayed in a small temple.

He was inclined to renounce the world completely but chose to leave the decision to his Guru. He waited at the little wayside temple so that God would show him the way. This did not take long in coming, for the old grandparents soon heard the news of his living in the town. They came to see him and embraced him.

"O Ekya! Where have you been all these years? How much we searched for you! Why were you angry with us? Now we won't ever let you go!"

And the grandfather showed Eknath his Guru's own letter to them. Eknath understood the Guru's wish and placed the letter on his head and on that same spot he built a hut for himself to live in. Later on it was replaced by a little house.

Then Eknath decided to celebrate Gokulashtami — the birthday of Sri Krishna — with a wonderful *namasamkirtana* where the voices like a great roar of joy sang on together the beloved names of the Lord.

Janardana Swami came over from Devagad and found to his delight that Shri Dattatreya was there, keeping a watch on the place.

They both got in, and Eknath hearing of the arrival of his Guru came running to greet him. He put the dust of the Guru's feet on his head and prostrated. During the *Katha*, Janardana Swami was extremely pleased to hear his disciple's beautiful and touching description of Sri Krishna's birth.

After the celebrations and as he was about to leave, the old couple embraced his feet and begged:

"Lord, you have shown him the path, now we pray and beg you, please see that the dynasty of Bhanudas doesn't die away. He is our only heir. Kindly influence him so that he takes a wife."

Janardana Swami agreed and told Eknath: "Settle down as a householder, my son. If you lead a life of moderation, you will see the Lord in all things, even so you will be able to dedicate your life to Sri Krishna."

A bride was found in Vijaypur, who was to prove one of the best assets of Eknath's life, for her selfless devotion, her constant understanding and her sharing his hardships with a happy heart marked her as a rare spouse, truly fit for a saint.

Girijabai was indeed like a Goddess bestowed on him by his Guru. She never gave him the slightest anxiety, but always forestalled his every wish and need, as a worthy partner would.

They lived thus 40 to 42 years in Paithana. In due course, the old couple passed away. Eknath who was a yogi par excellence, did not sorrow but chose instead to celebrate the sixth day of the dark fortnight in Phalgun which was his Guru's birthday as well as the day he gave him the *darshan* of Datta.

The festival spread out on the ghats by the river Godavari. *Kirtanas* never seemed to end as the enthusiastic clamour of the singing rose like the rumbling waves of an ocean of joy carrying the sacred name of the Lord from all banks and into the night, filling the universe.

God clears debt:

There was serving of meals in the afternoon, and

exposition of *Kathas* and *Kirtanas* at night. Uddhava, Eknath's servant, had borrowed Rs. 700 from a landlord on his master's name to hold the *Utsava*. On the next day, the landlord pressed Uddhava for repayment and was put off by him. He got suspicious and feeling he'd never see his money back, he went straight to Eknath and threatened him: "In Panduranga's name, you shouldn't be allowed to eat until you repay your debt!"

Without feeling in the least put out, both Girijabai and Eknath kept fasting and didn't touch a morsel of food. Uddhava also didn't eat.

Then Panduranga (Krishna) taking the form of Uddhava went up to the landlord. It was midnight and he was naturally much annoyed at being aroused from his sleep.

"What have you come here for so late?"

"To return the money."

"Can't that wait till tomorrow?"

"And what about my master and his wife fasting?"

So, the grumpy landlord, much against his will, got up and went out to open his shop, accepted the money and gave a receipt cancelling the debt.

The next day, the landlord feeling guilty of having caused trouble to a great saint like Eknath, went to him and embraced his feet. "Forgive me!" he said.

But Eknath humbly replied that he was himself at fault and would resume eating as soon as he had repaid his debt in full.

Hearing this the landlord turned to Uddhava and exclaimed: "What! Didn't you come last night to wake me up at midnight, with the money?"

"Certainly not!" replied the non-plussed Uddhava. Eknath went and opened his account book and there, neatly kept between the pages, was the receipt of the landlord.

Thus Eknath knew that it was all the doings of Panduranga and tears came to his eyes. Seeing this, the Sawakar (money-lender) again fell at the feet of Eknath begging for forgiveness and would not relent until Eknath gave him reassurance and peace of mind.

Nothing ever ruffled Eknath who was always even-minded and full of compassion.

An example of humanity:

As he bathed one day in the sacred Godavari, a Turk sitting on the ghats spat on him as he was coming out of the water. Without a word of reproach, Eknath simply went in and bathed again; as he came out wearing clean clothes, the Turk spat again and he went on and on and every time Eknath returned to the bath and came out so that he had countless baths until the foolish fellow got tired and was won over by his patience and forbearance.

"Forgive me," he said, "I did wrong to spit at you thus."

"Not at all," replied Eknath, "I was wrong to come in your way." His humility had the effect of plunging the man into a well of repentance and he fell at his feet. "Alas, I am a sinner, Maharaj, please bless me and forgive me!"

"No, no" said Eknath, "you did no wrong. Thanks to you I took 108 baths in the Godavari, it has done me good."

The Turk felt all the more repentant and begged for his teachings.

"Very well," said Eknath, "remember this: God is One, whether you call him Allah or any other name you choose. He also abides in all things. Behave so that you offend none and see God in all."

A New Lesson:

It is of the nature of people to be envious of those who gain more respect from others. Particularly in the learned who are secretly proud of their knowledge, this fault is often very pronounced.

Thus, the pundits were jealous of Eknath's fame as a saint and a sage. They snatched at the slightest opportunity to harass him.

So the moment they came across a poor Brahmin whom they found one day begging hither and thither at every door in town, they had an excuse. He needed Rs. 200, he said, to perform the *Munja* (*Yagnopavit* or sacred thread ceremony) of his son.

Mischief-makers were quick to sense in this the means to ridicule Eknath and made a pact with the Brahmin that if he actually could make Eknath angry, he would earn his Rs. 200 from them. They showed him the house and the Brahmin thinking it to be a matter of little consequence, walked straight into Eknath's home and without a single "by your leave," tramped about in his *puja* room with his chap-pals on.

Eknath was sitting in meditation. Seeing that he hadn't disturbed the saint, he went and fell heavily on his lap.

Eknath opened his eyes and laughed gently.

"Why, why, look at this great love! Though we haven't met yet, you seem to come from far and show such great affection!"

The Brahmin was taken aback and said: "Indeed, I come from far." "So come" said Eknath, "let us bathe in Ganga (Godavari) together and the meal is ready."

The Brahmin went to bathe and took purposely a very long time. He found Eknath waiting for him, courteously giving him the seat next to his. To the Brahmin, the earning of Rs. 200 became more difficult than expected and he felt the sum escaping him.

He had to act fast. So as a last resort, he decided to jump on the back of Girija. Everyone gasped in surprise, but Eknath laughed and told his wife, "Take care lest this big child falls down." And she who knew her husband's mind and was as patient as he, answered quite composed: "Don't worry on his account for carrying a child on my back while working is not new to me. He won't fall down."

This time the Brahmin broke down. Those sweet words were too much even in the balance of Rs. 200. He felt so ashamed that he got down and fell at Eknath's feet and drenched them with his tears, telling him his sad story.

"Why didn't you mention that earlier," said Eknath, "did you think I would have got cross with you?" He sent for Uddhava and told him to give Rs. 200 to the Brahmin.

God's Leela:

Ramu the Mahar (an untouchable) attended Eknath's *Kirtanas* and *Kathas* daily. His great desire

was that Eknath should one day come and have meals in his house. So, after a *Kirtana*, he humbly requested him to grace his house and partake of meals prepared by him.

Eknath answered that he would. The Mahar, exulted with joy, and all the town was agog at the news. People followed Eknath everywhere, anxious to see whether he would honour his promise and what would the consequences be. The pundits and Shastris argued as the stronghold of Brahmin orthodoxy buzzed with excitement.

The next day, they saw him enter Ramu's house where the Mahar and his wife placed their heads submissively on his feet and invited him with great love and affection to accept a seat; and Eknath obliged lovingly, sat on a path and ate the preparations they served on a plantain leaf. Everyone else stood watching from the outside.

The pundits of a common accord decided to excommunicate him then and there and so went over to his house to await his return, but their eyes widened in stupefaction as an impossible sight met them: Why, there was Eknath himself, teaching a chapter of the *Bhagavata* to his listeners!

The troupe made a round about turn and ran back to Ramu's house where Eknath as before, enjoyed Ramu's hospitality! How could he be in two places at the same time! By which magic did he possess two bodies and which of the two was the real Eknath? The pundits were utterly confused and retreated in shame. But Eknath understood Panduranga's action to protect his devotee and interpreted it thus: God had indeed taken his form and taught

the *Puranas* so that none could cast aspersions on him. The people of the town were wonderstruck at the power of such Bhakti which demands nothing from God but the sight of His hallowed feet.

Servant of Servant:

God loved His devotee so much that He even took the form of a servant and served him for 12 years. He was called Shrikhandya and did all kinds of jobs for him and Girijabai.

A Brahmin having come to Dwaraka to have the *darshan* of Sri Krishna was told by Rukmini Devi, Sri Krishna's consort, in a dream, that God was employed under the name of Shrikhandya in the house of Eknath who lived in Paithana. And that if he wanted to see him, that was where he should go.

The first person he met on arrival at Paithana was a servant going to fetch water in the river and he asked him the whereabouts of Eknath's house. The man who was none other than Shrikhandya, pointed the house to him.

Eknath received him with great joy and asked him who he was, from where he came and what he wanted.

"I come from Dwaraka and have come here to have a *darshan* of God."

"God is everywhere, omnipresent. He lives through all creatures, wherever you turn and look, there is but God and only He in all things."

"Please, do not take offence, my Lord," said the Brahmin, "but I know all this Vedantic stuff by heart, backwards and forwards. I am fed up with it and what I want is to see the Lord in his *saguna* or

form aspect; that is why I came from so far."

"But how do you expect to see him here?"

"Haven't you got one Shrikhandya on the premises? Please send for him!"

"Oh, yes, Shrikhandya just left to fetch water."

Then the Brahmin recollected that he was the very man he had met and who had showed him the house. Then he turned to Eknath, a significant look in his eyes. "God is here as Shrikhandya!" Eknath called and called but no one came.

Uddhava said: "He was here just a moment ago."

Girija commented: "After placing the water vessels, he went into the puja room." But there was no trace of the man anywhere.

Eknath understood and took the Brahmin into the worship room and prayed intensely to Panduranga. The room gradually lit with glowing effulgence and the form of Sri Krishna, resplendent with love and compassion, appeared before them. Eknath and the Brahmin shed tears of joy and the Lord having blessed them, returned to his unseen state. The Brahmin thanked Eknath profusely and then left for Dwaraka.

Born in the centre of orthodoxy of the Brahmin "kingdom" of Paithana, Eknath nevertheless held on to his principles and never made a difference between castes and practised exactly as he preached.

"There is no bar on caste, colour, sex or age," he would say. "God exists in all souls and one should behave alike with all."

Eknath was to entertain Brahmins on the occasion of the *Shradh* of his father. Girija bathed early and with Uddhava's and Shrikhandya's help, started cooking.

Sraddha Feeding:

One among the Mahars passing by in the street outside said: "Humm, smells good, some nice food is being cooked." And another added: "Such food is not for the like of us, so pass on!"

Eknath having heard their remarks asked Girijabai: "Some Mahars passing by have a desire to eat as they smelt the aroma of cooking; shall we offer them this food and can you then cook again for the others?"

"There is no difficulty at all," replied the good wife, "Have I ever refused you anything? Whatever comes to your mind is right."

Eknath sent Uddhava to invite all the Mahars of the town to the feast. They filled the place to capacity and took their meals on plantain leaves neatly spread on the freshly washed floor, decorated with colourful *rangolis* (coloured powder designs). Eknath seeing the Lord in his guests served them lovingly.

When they left, Girija got the floor washed and plastered anew with cowdung and *rangoli* and went to have another bath as was the custom. After that she started cooking all over again. But not a single Brahmin made an appearance. Wherever Uddhava went to remind them of the feast, he met with curses: "Is this Bhanudas' great-grandson whose life seems to serve no other purpose than that of destroying the Brahmins' *dharma*?"

Eknath went to request them in person: "The first food was cooked for you but the Mahars smelt it and so according to your idea, it was impure and I gave it to them. We bathed, washed and purified the

place and cooked anew. Please come now and enjoy the food of the *Shradh*."

"You who are so well learned," they replied scornfully, "go and feed your ancestors. We won't have any of such food served us after the Mahars sat first. So go now, and let your ancestors eat and enjoy it!"

Then Shrikhandya stepped forward and told the Brahmins: "Yes indeed, they will certainly come and enjoy the food!"

Then he took Eknath by the hand and led him indoors and there, Eknath's face lit up with joy at the wonderful sight:

On the paths neatly disposed on the polished floor, sat his ancestors, his guests! Eknath closed his eyes and prayed to Panduranga and bowing to them he began to serve them all.

The obdurate Brahmins, observing this from the door, went home silently reflecting on Eknath's principles which had utterly escaped their limited understanding.

Bhagavata Episode:

As Eknath after the manner of Saint Jnaneshwar was expounding the *Bhagavata* in Marathi, one of his disciples took it all down and left for Kashi with four completed *Adhyayas* (chapters) of the book. There he sat on the Manikarni Ghat and began to read from it, attracting large crowds. The sound was so sweet that in spite of few being acquainted with the Marathi language, they stayed on to listen as he went on translating for them in the northern Prakrit.

Some disciples of a great Mahant of a local Math

reported this to their Guru who sent for him and abused him for vulgarising the holy scriptures and threatened to fix his Guru as well.

"My Lord," said the disciple who feared them, "I haven't got the brains nor such talent. This is the work of my Guru who lives in Paithana. He is a saintly man, a realised soul, who writes the scriptures in Marathi so that ordinary people may understand them."

The Sadhu said he wanted to see him and sent a letter to Eknath through two of his disciples, summoning him to appear before him.

Meanwhile Eknath had completed his fifth *Adhyaya* as it had been his Guru's desire that it should be so. Eknath left for Kashi, taking the last *Adhyaya* with him.

At the sight of his noble and peaceful countenance, the people of Kashi felt elated. But the Mahant, to show his contempt, treated him like an outcaste, refusing to cast eyes on him, lest they become polluted, and spoke to him through a curtain as Muslim ladies did in those days.

In answer to Eknath's question as to why, having sent for him, he refused to see him, the Mahant replied: "Whoever writes and propagates the scriptures in Prakrit is a *pakhandi* (an uncivilised heretic or outlaw) to my mind. I don't wish to look at such a one. You have insulted the language of the Gods!"

At that the assembly shouted in unison: "True, true!"

Then there followed a silence as Eknath stated his defence plan. "My Lord, with due respect to your status and wisdom, I don't think I have done so. Such

a beautiful work as the sacred *Bhagavata* is indeed wasted on ordinary people who don't understand Sanskrit. It was in order to convey to them its import and beauty, that I translated it in Marathi.

"Pray forgive me, my Lord, but how come the Gods created Sanskrit and thieves made Prakrit? Kindly listen to my prayer, if you find in this work any faulty translation or any mistake and confusion of meaning, I shall forthwith drown this whole work in Ganga. But please listen to it and apply the test carefully."

"Very well, read on, then..."

In that great assembly of the wise, before several heads of sects and maths and pundits from all parts of the country, Eknath began his reading in a steady, soft and deep voice.

The sweet flow of rhythm, the chastity of words and the richness of ideas entranced his listeners. Tears came to their eyes. The audience was uplifted into the realm of pure devotion and relished every word with deep contentment and peace.

The Mahant tore away his ridiculous curtain and embraced Eknath.

The whole of Kashi was there cheering the humble saint and the various mahants requested him not to leave but stay with them and complete the readings of the *Bhagavata*. He accepted and resided in Kashi for one year.

Having studiously and lovingly learnt the *Jnaneshwari* and other works of the great saint Jnaneshwar, like the *Amrutaanubhava*, with his Guru, his style and ideas resembled very much those of the young saint. Sometimes it even seemed as if they

were a prolongation of those works. Yet Eknath had the gift of poetry few could emulate.

The Mahant was extremely pleased and wanted to honour Eknath by taking him on an elephant ride at the head of a great procession through the town. Eknath, self-effacing and humble, declined the offer and suggested instead that they take his book in procession. "I cannot bear that I should ride an elephant while you follow on foot, it isn't right."

Such humility, love and thoughtfulness endeared him all the more to them and according to his wishes, they had a magnificent procession led by his *Bhagavata* book, followed and preceded by music, cheers and vermilion powder blown over by bystanders. Eknath remarked that it was his Guru's Guru, Shri Dattatreya, who blessed him and inspired him while writing the work.

An Act of Mercy:

Before leaving Kashi, Eknath filled a pot of Ganga water so that he might later offer it to Rameshwara in the deep South, as is the custom.

Reaching the Godavari banks, the heat was killing, the sand burning. There was neither shade nor trees and nothing but a heat waste in front of them. The party panted and perspired profusely. Then they heard the miserable braying of a donkey that had ventured in the hot sands in search of water, but could not proceed.

The river was yet far away, the stretch of sand was intractable so that Eknath, moved to pity by his distress, without pausing to reflect for a moment,

poured all his Ganga water into the mouth of the donkey.

His followers were greatly astonished for that water had been brought with great care and much trouble.

Uddhava asked: "What shall we bring now to the Lord of Rameshwaram?"

Pointing at the donkey, Eknath replied simply: "This is my Rameshwara."

Vision of Jnanoba:

Some years later, without any apparent reason, Eknath's throat began to swell and an unknown pain made him very uncomfortable. He then dreamt that the young saint Jnaneshwar who had taken *Maha-samadhi* 300 years earlier at Alandi in a cave which was sealed over him, complained that the root of the anjana tree nearby was choking him and asked him to come and remove it.

Eknath immediately summoned Uddhava to make preparations to leave for Alandi. The party left Paithana to the beat of mridangas and cymbals, singing *kirtanas* all the way.

Some parts of Alandi, particularly near the Siddheswar Temple were over-run by jungle and it took a long time for Eknath to single out the particular anjana tree under which Saint Jnaneshwar lay in *Samadhi*. He prized open a massive stone slab and slipped into the opening. He found there the subtle form of Shri Jnaneshwar, illumined by its own effulgence while a sweet aroma pervaded the cave.

Eknath saluted the saint and removed the root. Jnaneshwar spoke to him affectionately: "Nathya,

the root was only an excuse to call you here. In these last 300 years, my *Jnaneshwari* has become corrupted with misinterpretations and interpolations. All I desire is that you salvage the original and rewrite it as it was, in the way I had intended it to be."

They stayed together three days conversing and discussing and so Eknath who had been greatly blessed in his company, gently placed his head on Jnaneshwar's feet and extricating himself out of the *samadhi* cave returned to his followers who were still singing *kirtanas* to their heart's content.

It took a full year for Eknath to sort out the *Jnaneshwari*, clearing it of unwelcome additions or omissions, in short, of all the corruptions centuries of mouth to mouth repetitions had added to this magnificent work. The *Jnaneshwari* which is available to us today, is the one amended by Eknath.

Eknath and party also visited Pandharpur where the citizens came out in a body to carry him in procession to the sacred temple of Vithal, the temple sacred to the memory of all Maharashtrian saints for over seven centuries.

Death Detained:

A certain Brahmin named Krishnadas approached Eknath one day and humbly beseeched him to complete the *Ramayana* he was writing because an astrologer who had never been known to have made a mistake in his predictions, had told him that his time to leave this world had arrived.

The old man had tears in his eyes as he viewed his life's work and ambition to be destined to remain incomplete.

He looked at Eknath with pleading anxiety and said: "Maharaj, kindly finish it for me!" Eknath read the manuscript and liked it and so asked him: "How long do you need to complete it yourself?"

"Eleven days," replied the Brahmin.

"Good," said Eknath, "you can stay here and complete it in peace. Death will not come to you for these 11 days."

Thus Krishnadas stayed at Eknath's place and went on writing. After 11 days the *Ramayana* was duly completed and he expired peacefully, his soul at rest.

Stone Bull Eats Grass:

In Paithana, one often met the familiar figure of a sannyasin whose habit it was to prostrate before everybody. He was a slightly eccentric devotee of the name of God who liked to salute God under the form of whoever he met on the road. They called him Dandavat Baba.

As he passed one day by the carcass of a donkey, some children asked him: "Dandavat Baba, why don't you also prostrate to the dead donkey?"

Obliging them, the Baba did so and to everyone's amazement, the animal came back to life, got up and romped away. The news of it reached Eknath who felt concern for the sannyasin.

He went and asked the old Baba why he had revived the donkey.

"I don't know," said the Baba helplessly, "I didn't do anything."

"Do you realise," said Eknath, "how people are going to exploit you and trouble you to revive their

dead? What are you going to do about it?"

"I wish I knew," he answered and looked up to Eknath, spreading his hands and asked: "Please tell me what you think is best."

Eknath then spoke about the ideal of sannyasins who have no ties in this world and for whom life and death are the same since they are identified with the soul which lives in its infinite state and suggested he give up his own body, by taking *Mahasamadhi*. This suited the Dandavat Baba well and he accepted his idea with great relief.

As could be expected, however, it needed but just such a spark to ventilate the fire of envy and jealousy of the learned pundits of Paithana,

Eknath was forthwith branded as the killer of a Brahman. No matter how he tried to clear himself, they wouldn't listen. They held a meeting in front of a Shiva temple and Eknath repeated what he had said so many times and over before: "I did not force him and God is witness that I am not guilty."

"Right," cried their spokesman, "if God is witness of your innocence, let us see you feed fodder to this Nandi Bull (Shiva's vehicle). If God causes the bull to eat the grass, you will be exonerated, not otherwise!"

How foolish, thought Eknath, but if this were the wish of his beloved Panduranga, well then let Panduranga deal with this in his own way. He took the fodder from the pundit's hands and walked up to the bull. The pundits laughed. They had seen many miracles in Eknath's time and life, but this was something outside the pale of any.

Eknath humbly bowed to the stone Nandi, patted

him gently on the head and offered him the fodder, and yes, he opened his mouth, licked and ate the fodder, got up and trotted away and disappeared into the Godavari.

Pride Humbled:

Eknath's son Hari Pandit was well read but wilful and proud. He objected to his father popularising the scriptures through Marathi. As he loved his father, he didn't want to criticise him openly. So he got ready with his wife and children to leave quietly for Kashi.

He told Eknath who asked the reason of his leaving that he had no intention of returning. "I cannot bear to hear you vulgarising the scriptures and by my leaving, we shall both be happy."

After four years, Eknath went to Kashi and pleaded with his son to return to Paithana. But Hari Pandit was adamant.

So Eknath, much against his heart promised not to read the *Puranas* in Marathi and to leave him the job of doing so in Sanskrit. Therefore, Hari Pandit came back and held discourses on the scriptures in Sanskrit to gradually thinning audiences until none came to listen to him. Undeterred, he still continued while people began to request Eknath to resume his own *Kathas*.

At last there came an old woman who approached Eknath with a request. She had always had a great desire to feed one thousand Brahmins; but from wealth, she had come into poverty and could not afford the same. So could Shri Eknath whom she considered

worth many thousand Brahmins, come to her house and accept an invitation to a meal?

Ekknath told her of his promise to his son, not to go anywhere but said he'd come. Hari Pandit who was consulted and felt pity for the old woman asked her if it were all right if he himself cooked the food at her place. She said she didn't mind.

The next day, Hari Pandit cooked in the widow's little kitchen and then the old lady served them both as Eknath and Hari Pandit sat side by side. Hari Pandit however noticed that the old one had surreptitiously placed a small vessel of a preparation she had made, on Eknath's plantain leaf. He resented it but kept his peace.

When they all got up to wash their hands, Eknath pointed at the leftover leaves and told his son: "Let us spare the old lady the trouble of removing them, so please do it yourself."

Hari Pandit obligingly bent down to remove his father's leaf when he found a second below the first; he thought two leaves had been placed there by mistake so he removed both. But a third one appeared and then a fourth and so forth.

Hari felt weary and counted a thousand when it stopped.

With vivid clarity the truth dawned on his mind. It was not the letter of the scriptures that mattered, but faith in their meaning and the Self.

His father who touched prohibited food (from outcastes), and spoke in the language of the people, Marathi, made the people understand the beauty of the Sanskrit works, and was alone worth a thousand learned Brahmins whereas he, Hari Pandit, with his

pedantic set of values based on his narrow knowledge, had reached nowhere.

His pride blew out as if a strong wind of realisation had destroyed it entirely. He fell humbly at his father's feet.

Ekknath blessed him and said: "Get up, Hari, rise my son. Though you have learnt all the *Shastras*, you haven't learnt a thing about humility. That is why you lacked that understanding while interpreting them. You are intelligent and now you will realise that Bhakti is something else in itself."

Hari Pandit understood and said: "O my Father, forgive me! From now on please resume the reading of the *Puranas* and the *Shastras* in your own way and eat from whosoever and wherever you please."

Goddess of Godavari:

Ekknath's *Kathas* began again to attract large audiences and people started to notice a particular young woman whose beauty caused many to have improper thoughts about her. She came daily at the start and left only at the end and her whereabouts and name were unknown. She had a dignified and restful appearance and spoke with a clear and sweet voice. However, one night a group of people followed her without her knowledge and as she went down the ghats, she suddenly disappeared in the darkness where river and night met as one.

The next evening, Eknath asked her: "Why Bai (lady), did someone give you any trouble yesterday? Shall I send you an escort tonight?" She smiled and answered in her melodious voice: "Please do not

trouble yourself, with your grace always upon me, I have escort enough."

Later people understood that she was none other than the Goddess Godavari who from then on, seen or unseen, attended all *Kathas*. Since then a path is always reserved for her wherever a *Kirtan* or *Katha* takes place.

Cot for Firewood:

On a stormy night, an old Brahmin was directed by the town's people to Eknath's house. He was an unknown traveller caught up in heavy rains and Eknath at once ordered a fire to be lit to cook food and dry his clothes. But Girijabai's store of wood was soaking wet in the rain and she could not start a fire though she tried very hard.

Eknath, without any hesitation, gave his own cot to Uddhava, as replacement for kitchen fuel. Eknath time and again showed that the needs of a guest come first, no matter what. He was fully gratified to see the Brahmin fed, clothed and rested.

Freed from any selfish motive, Eknath's compassion and kind heart worked wonders with others. He proved also a resourceful psychologist who not only treated his son's obdurate pride, but the children of many a distraught mother.

He would fast with a widow's little son and eat the same diet or medicine as he, thus creating confidence in him so that he followed the physician's orders.

He also provided *puran podis* (a sweet) for the son of another widow who could not provide for her lad's extravagant taste. Not only was he cured of his

habit but Eknath blessed him so that becoming his disciple, the boy named Gavaba was asked by him to complete the writing of the *Ramayana*, the reading of which he continued after the passing away of his Master.

Three Thieves:

While Eknath was busy one night conducting a *kirtana* in his house, three thieves slipped in and hid on the premises. After the *Kirtana* was over and the inmates of the house fell asleep, they quietly crept into the inside rooms and collected whatever in pots and articles they could lay their hands on. They piled them near the door and went in for more. Then calamity struck.

One after the other the thieves became blind. Groping around for the way out, they stumbled upon the heap of pots and the noise woke up Eknath who came to see what the fracas was about.

Hearing his footsteps the thieves who had realised that they had committed a crime by robbing the house of a saint, for which they had become afflicted with blindness, cowed and huddled together to hide their trembling.

Eknath called them and asked the reason of their fear and all three fell at his feet and told him of their woe.

He immediately passed his hands over their eyes and they regained their sight.

He called Girijabai and asked her and Uddhava to feed them and then he sent them away with all the pots they had stolen. The thieves overwhelmed by

his goodness and generosity, fell again at his feet and swore that they would never steal again.

Seeing their change of heart, Eknath blessed them and explained: "God has come into my house in your forms, so go now, take these pots and start life anew, adhering to the honest path."

Eknath's sense of justice and compassion were the same throughout his life in spite of the Brahmins' jealousies and attempts at destroying him.

Harijan Child:

Late in age, he picked up the child of a Harijan woman who had been to the river to fetch water and forgotten the infant in the sands.

The cries of the child attracted him and out of pity, he lifted him gently and carried him home to its mother. Then he went and bathed again.

The small episode had the effect of enraging the local Brahmins who cried: "Horror! The sacred lineage of Bhanudas has been made impure by this descendant of his who abuses his Brahminhood!"

This time they wanted to make sure of Eknath taking steps for a full purification, "I need no more purification," he protested, "I did go and bathe again." They wanted more than that and they might perhaps even impose a death sentence on him on any pretext.

Eknath went wearily down the ghats to the river to start penance in order to please them, when a Brahmin attacked with leprosy suddenly dashed forward causing much rumblings and grumblings as he made his way towards Eknath and prostrated himself full length before him.

"It is 12 years since I suffer from this incurable

disease," he told Eknath and the crowd that collected around them. "I did penance at Triambakeshwar where I was told in a dream that if Paithana's saint Eknath was willing to part with the merit he obtained in carrying the Mahar boy, I would be cured."

Eknath, modest and humble as ever, answered: "I know neither sin nor merit. But if you think it will help you, by all means, receive in your hands whatever merit I might have earned this way."

He placed his hand over that of the Brahmin and the stricken one rose a cured man.

All the other tempestuous Brahmins turned about shamefacedly and without a word retired to their respective homes.

Eknath's whole life was a living example of the intrinsic goodness of the soul as applied through his actions and sayings to circumstances or his relations with others.

His altruism, his universal love, his ingrained humility and his integrity that brooked no compromise with his ideal, all marked him as a man far above the run of humanity.

His enchanting poetry sets the Marathi literature with some of its rare gems, it reaches such heights of emotion that one wonders how one so self-disciplined and self-controlled remained at heart a devotee, overflowing with the love of God.

But such was Eknath, a unique blend of the sincere devotee and the Jnani. It is extraordinary indeed that a poet could control such great flights of devotional feelings to lead at the same time a mea-

sured life of moderation, abnegation and sacrifice for others.

Eknath took *Mahasamadhi* in 1606.

Teachings:

The sayings of a man who practised what he preached must be of special interest to us:

Duty well performed purifies the mind, and qualifies one for Bhakti (devotion). The Vedas should be followed as long as one has not risen above attachment and duality just as a watchman is needed to guard the fruits of a mango tree until the fruits are removed and then he can be dispensed with. So when a man transcends body consciousness he is beyond the Vedic Order.

Eknath advises constant repetition of the name of God which leads to constant remembrance of the Lord. God who is so hard to be obtained by yoga and austerities, comes and dances in the *Kirtanas*. Thus, we should sing and dance in joy and never demand anything from others. Saints, he remarks, should perform a *Kirtana* in such a way as to impress deeply the form of God in the minds of those who attend it.

One should be able to realise God while staying in the world, says Eknath. Yet in a charming illustration, he maintains that one should first realise God in solitude. As the saying goes, where there are two, the demon makes the third. Thus, "when a girl engaged to be married is visited by the family of her would-be husband, she usually offers them hospitality through a window to show that she is alone. Later on, as she helps her mother pounding rice, she notices that her bangles begin to rattle rather loudly which

might carry the wrong impression that they might be poor, so she removes one bangle after another until she has just one bangle left on each wrist which leaves her free to work without attracting attention. Only in solitude is one able to be face to face with God within one's own heart.

If ever there was a saint who preached forbearance by example it was Eknath. The worst of all faults he warned is looking at and interfering in the faults of others. What we see is mainly the reflection of our own faults and sins. So there is no point in getting angry and harbouring feelings of revenge against others.

With whom will you be angry if your tongue gets bitten by your teeth? Can you hit at either? Some feel justified to get angry if they collide with another person but if somebody slips and falls by himself, with whom can he be cross? He most probably gets up, looks down a bit ashamed and resumes his walk.

A true saint, says Eknath, is he who suffers the slanders of others without anger and never feels hurt, because he has realised his oneness with the Universe.

He also strongly advises the spiritual aspirant to shun sex and the desire for wealth: "How can one rise above worldliness in the midst of such entanglements?"

"One should shun the company of those who glorify sex and indulge in it over much. A spiritual aspirant should not even take a chance in associating with a *satvic* woman (of pure qualities), even though she might prove to be a helpmate, for our fickle mind, not yet established in God through concentration,

might have an imminent fall and it is thus unwise to jeopardise all one's life's aspirations and endeavours for so little."

"The two greatest impediments to spiritual progress," warned Eknath time and again, "are woman and wealth."

Eknath liked to quote the *Avadhuta* who learnt by observing nature and took 24 examples as "Gurus" on which to model his own life. He says that one can learn from nearly everything in this world as the world remains a storehouse of teachers. What is needed is the *will* to learn.

All the saints of Maharashtra have extolled Bhakti as the easy way.

"Through love," says Eknath, "the devotee can even become God". "God and his devotees are akin to the Ocean and its waves."

Eknath often compared a learned man bereft of devotion to a prostitute who keeps on changing her ornaments.

He also condemned unnecessary penances of the body while the mind remains steeped in worldliness. "To emaciate one's body with fasts and the like is not true penance. So long as evil passions persist in man, all external appliances are useless."

Saints like Eknath reach the point of Vedanta in which they cry in touching words: "I am the singer as well as the hearer, O Lord, I am thy song!"

MANKOJI BODHALE

Five hundred Pathans on horseback rushed into the gully to teach that insolent Maratha a lesson which would send him posthaste to greet his dead ancestors.

The young Maratha however had no equal and his spear was fast and accurate.

Mankoji had been born in Maharashtra torn asunder by famines and invaders who ransacked town after town and respected neither places of worship, nor the order of things according to the customs of the land. With a few friends, he organised raiding parties and harassed the enemy.

The Badshah therefore sent 500 Pathans to settle him once and for all, or bring him prisoner.

Mankoji knew the terrain far better and surprised them, engaging 120 of them single handed and his band of young volunteers dealt the remaining the blows they had thought would befall the young men.

The Badshah, hearing of his bravery felt elated, for it needs a good warrior to appreciate another, and tried to honour him.

Mankoji was born in the 16th century, round about the same time as the great saint Eknath. His father came from the village of Saswad, but due to dire famine, he moved with his family first to Tuljapur and then to Dhaman in the Bole Ghat. Mankoji was born in Dhaman and was a strong and healthy youth

who was an expert in hunting and hurling the lance. He was married when still quite young and sometime later lost both his parents.

One day, Mankoji accompanied his paternal uncles to Pandharpur, centre of religious fervour and devotion for centuries, at the temple of Panduranga, or Vithala (Krishna).

The *murti* of Panduranga seemed to be alive as if emanating from a universal source of light. Mankoji forgot all else and remained there, engrossed in the Lord.

Even though all had left and the temple closed for the night, Mankoji sat at the feet of Vithala, entranced by His Presence. He stayed thus for many days.

God was pleased and taking the form of a child, brought him daily a *thali* of food in order to sustain him. Mankoji ate and thanked the Lord. Then Panduranga would resume His form and teach him. That is how he got his name Bodhala (the taught).

Mankoji was so happy near Vithala and in the company of saints and devotees that he was most reluctant to return to Dhaman. So, he arranged to get a replica of the *murti* of Vithala which he carried with him and installed at Dhaman.

When Mankoji was alone, he always felt that Panduranga was standing behind him. His life was now filled with God. Panduranga became his everything.

Some devotees used to tell him that unless he got himself initiated, his endeavours to succeed in the spiritual path and have God-realisation, would come to nought.

Mankoji prayed to Vithala for guidance and the Lord sent him to the Virupaksha Math which was situated in a cave in Mandavya. He found spiritual solace there, and had the vision of Dattatreya.

Famines had become a constant plague in Maharashtra. During such a famine, Mankoji distributed all his grain to hungry villagers, so that he had no seeds left to sow for the next season.

The villagers gave him some which he planted in a patch and when it grew and ripened, some hungry Varkaris (pilgrims) passed through the village and rested on their way to Pandharpur. Mankoji gave them all the standing ears of grain called *hurda* which they roasted on a fire of cowdung cakes and ate with delight.

As nobody would help him now, he went to the river and collected bags of sand which he sowed in his field as if they were wheat grains. But strangely enough, they did sprout and grow into a magnificent field of rippling gold and creamy *shalu* (jowar).

A new levy had been imposed on farmers and as Mankoji was unable to pay it, he asked the landlady to give him a loan, which she refused. But Panduranga, in the form of a Mahar, went to the official and paid Mankoji's dues.

At another time, Mankoji had again no seeds to plant, so he plowed and sowed pumpkins and gourds. All the villagers teased him about it.

"Where will you sell that many pumpkins? There are enough for you to store to the end of your days. but where will you store them?" and they laughed.

Mankoji started to collect his pumpkins while the villagers watched. He brought bags and containers

to store wheat and the onlookers laughed again.

"Are you harvesting your pumpkins in small wheat bags?" they asked.

Mankoji then began to break them open one by one and out of each came a measure of wheat. Then the villagers helped him open the lot and the field was soon harvested.

When, for a change, Mankoji's field had been normally full of *shalu*, his wife begged him: "I request you this time not to give any *hurda* (ripe grain plucked for eating, roasted in the field) with your hands to anyone. Promise me you won't!" He agreed.

But then again, a party of Varkaris floundered into the village, dying of hunger and who was there but Mankoji to think of them and feel for their need and send them all to feed on his field?

"I promised not to touch the ears of grain," he told them, "but you are welcome to go there and help yourselves."

They gladly availed themselves of the invitation and made a wonderful *hurda* of most of the field and went away gratified, blessing Mankoji in their hearts.

Mankoji's partner seeing threefourths of their field shorn of its grain, sued Mankoji in court

The judge went to see for himself the extent of the damage and to his and everyone else's amazement, the field was full of standing grain, ripe for the cutting.

"I'm sorry, forgive me for troubling you on false information," said the judge.

The patil Lobhaji had a slave girl called Rasi and as she was fond of Mankoji's *kirtans* and so desirous to follow the religious life as a devotee of Pandu-

ranga, the patil resented it and sold her to another merchant.

But Rasi who had given her heart to Vithala, hearing the sound of the sweet *kirtan* of God's name, ran in its direction, unmindful of her duties or what her masters wanted her to do.

As she ran, the patil and his men ran after her and chased her down the lanes of the village up to the ground where the *kirtan* was going on in full swing.

"Hari Vithala, Vithala, Panduranga, Ramakrishna Hari!"

Rasi ran and was nearly out of breath and cried in despair: "O Mankoji, Save me!"

They say that Mankoji's great spiritual powers lifted her out of her pursuers' reach and that she disappeared in the skies where God mercifully received her in his Vaikuntha.

Many are the miracles attributed to him, including, curing the daughter of Aurangzeb's minister who was dangerously ill, by placing his hand over her head.

His *abhangas* exult in the joy of the love of God. Joy at the rains, joy at seeing Panduranga and Rakhu-mai bless their devotees and joy at serving the saints and devotees which meant serving the Lord.

The Name is all one needs and he sings: "Let the name of Ramakrishna Hari be always in your heart. The Lord gives the joy of true love to his devotees in abundance. Thou art the life of our lives. O Lord, says Bodhale, I have now understood your Lila, O Gopala, you go on playing with your own creation!"

SANT TUKARAM

The year was 1616. Maharashtra was in the grip of a dire famine. Broad rivers thinned into mere filaments and altogether disappeared from their spacious beds. The usually smiling valleys saw the eerie dance of whirling dust storms hurling sand and dust and blotting out the sun.

This dreadful state of affairs lasted for years, and many tearfully left their dear homes and dearer lands for places where nature was less cruel. Those who had saved enough to outlive the famine jealously clung on to every grain. Yet a few of them shared what they had with those that had none. But their number was few. Very few.

Reeling under abject poverty, many begged, borrowed or even dared to steal to stave off the otherwise certain death. Such was the case of a poor Brahmin who could not bear to see his children perish before his very eyes. The look of anguish on the face of his emaciated wife and the whimperings of the young ones made him bold to defy the codes of conduct by contracting debts which he knew he could never repay.

The local Patil (Village Chief) sentenced him to wear a halter around his neck as punishment for non-repayment of loans. Hungry and haltered, he was reduced to begging in the streets.

The hapless Brahmin's state of shame, fear, an-

xiety and extreme distress moved Tukaram to exclaim: "O! Poor man!"

Mumbled the Brahmin: "My wife and children are starving. Penniless I am, and now punished too for not paying off my debts."

"How much do you owe?" enquired Tukaram.

"Rs. 250."

"Set your mind at rest, I shall clear your debt. Come with me to the Patil."

It did not take him long to clear the Brahmin's dues, set him free and give an extra sum of money to meet his immediate wants.

Pledging her ornaments, Tukaram's wife Jijabai, who was also known as Avalibai, had raised some money and sent her husband to do some trade to feed his own family. It was this money that Tukaram had lavished on the poor Brahmin.

Viswambhar, a forefather of Tukaram, was a very great devotee of Vithoba and every fortnight he used to make pilgrimage to Pandharpur. His devotion to Panduranga was so great that he had no heart to leave Pandharpur. One day Vithoba assured him in a dream that He would always reside with him. Viswambhar was shown an idol of Vithoba under a mango grove which on waking up he installed in a small temple near the river Indrayani and worshipped till the end of his days. Viswambhar had begged Vithoba that his family might always be devoted to him.

Tukaram's parents, Bolhoba of Dehu and his wife Kanakai, were a godly couple and Tukaram was born after ardent prayers to Vithoba who was their family deity. (Vithoba (Krishna) is also called Vithala and

Panduranga.) They were tradesmen (Kunbis) by profession.

Their eldest son was Savaji, then came Tukaram, in 1598, followed by Kanhoba, the youngest. Tuka was taught reading and writing and the art of trading from an early age. He was still very young when they got him married first to Rakhumai Damekari, the daughter of a landlord from Poona and then to Jijai whose father, Appaji Gulve, was also a Poona landlord. Rakhumai's delicate health could not endure the hardships of the famine to which she succumbed along with their son, Santu.

Tuka's gentle voice and kind heart won him many friends and under normal times, his business prospered well. He was always prompt in serving sadhus and saints and never turned away a needy person from his doorstep.

His parents died a few years before the famine. Then calamity struck and food and money became scarce. In spite of the help extended by other shopkeepers, he became nearly destitute as he could not help succouring others in their sufferings. When the bullocks first died followed by the unfortunate Rakhumai and Santu, the others narrowly escaped similar fate. His lands were sold to pay his debts and there was nothing left but to become a beggar. Everyone, from the Patil downward blamed him, which made him unhappy.

Tukaram began to be filled with renunciation of the world. Life was no better than vomit and he decided to give it up. He threw into the river Indrayani all his account books and other worldly tokens and retired to a lonely place where his ancestors had

formerly built a temple to Pandurang. He worshipped Vithala there every morning regularly. He took no notice of the remonstrances of his wife, relatives and others. He was even glad that his wife was a termagant and that he had lost reputation, money, business, cattle and lands. He was free at last to devote himself entirely to Vithala. "Panduranga, no thing stands now between us two!" he sang to God having become more attached to a world of God-mad devotees than to the world of his own kith and kin. "Alas," complained Tuka, "My wife runs after my guests like a mad dog!" She accused his guests of getting what they liked without working. "A completely shameless lot, beating *tal* (measure) and singing day and night as if they have nothing better to do. It is indeed a pity they do not drop dead, for their wives must certainly be cursing them in their misery!" she used to shout.

To escape the jarring atmosphere of his home, he chose a spot on the Mandara mountain where he spent the day meditating on God and reading the works of saints such as the *Bhagavata* of Eknath, the *Abhangs* of Nam Dev and the *Jnaneshwari*. This put his wife to much trouble on account of his meals having to be sent up there. Jijai was after all a faithful and devoted wife. She struggled uphill in the midday sun, bringing his food and after having served him duly, would eat what remained of it.

Tukaram was unaware of her hardships until one day when the poor woman collapsed with exhaustion after a large thorn pricked her foot. She fell all in a heap and began to cry in helplessness. Lord Vithala

took pity on her plight and assuming a human form, came to her rescue. Removing the thorn, He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet, spoke to her encouraging words and disappeared.

Tukaram was surprised to see Jijai's tear-stained looks and asked her what the matter was. When she related to him the incident, tears came to his eyes as he said in a halting voice: "O! my God, it was verily Panduranga in person who relieved you of your distress! How much have I taxed His kindness and love! From today I shall take my meals at home so that you may not again be inconvenienced and trouble the Lord about it."

Tukaram's mind had now reached the stage of thirst for realization and for the vision of God. It was in a dream that he received initiation from one Babaji of the line of Raghava and Keshva Chaitanya, direct disciples of Sachchidananda Baba whose Guru was Jnaneshwar. He gave him the simple and pure mantra of *Ramakrishna Hari* and blessed him. This happened on a Thursday on the 10th day of the bright lunar fortnight of Magha, in 1619.

Tukaram's devotion went on increasing day by day until the world seemed to exist no more for him. He composed heart-rending poems of longing for God and songs of praise and love for his Lord. The great saint Nam Dev appeared to him in a dream, accompanied by Shri Vithala. He patted him affectionately on the back and asked him to compose verses for which God would mark the measure. Tuka's face glowed with happiness as he truly felt that everything was done by the will of God and he humbly accepted his wish.

Tuka held *kirtanas* in Dehu, Poona and Lohagaon where people thronged in great numbers. They began to take notice of his saintliness and praised him, repeating his touching songs while they went about their business in their daily chores. Women sang as they rotated the mill stones grinding rice or wheat, others when they waited at the wells to draw water, and men sang while following the furrows of the plough in the fields. The whole country sang with Tukaram in his desire to see the blessed feet of Krishna, their beloved Vithala.

All this popularity had the effect of enraging some learned Brahmin called Rameshwar Bhat. His jealousy of Tuka's fame could not be concealed and he tried to vilify him in several ways. He even accused him of stealing his poems and of presenting them as his own compositions. Rameshwar Bhat was a well-read pundit but he lacked the perception needed to realize what he was reading about and preaching to others. He soon branded Tuka's *abhangs* as being against the Vedas and other scriptures and so condemned them to be thrown into the river.

Tukaram felt bound to obey the pundit's order and wrapping his writings in a cloth, he tied a stone to the parcel and sent it sinking to the bottom of the Indrayani river. But it left him a broken man. His life's offerings to God had been destroyed and he felt no more inclined to live. He fasted on the banks of the river, refusing food and even water. If God didn't appreciate his writings and hid himself behind a stone image, Tuka would give up his life and hold God responsible.

Tuka went on uninterruptedly singing "Vithala,

Vithala, Panduranga," echoed by crowds of sympathisers on the banks. His wife and children fasted with him. The air was tense with apprehension, Tuka's breath faltered, yet he went on conducting the sweet *kirtana* of the Lord's name with full faith.

It was on the 13th day that the miracle happened. Before the astonished gaze of all and the utter joy of Tukaram, the missing *abhangs* (devotional poems) surfaced on the water and glided gently to the shore. While the devotees rushed down to retrieve the cherished manuscripts, Tukaram had the blissful vision of the Lord standing as a youth by his side, comforting him.

"Ah," said Tuka, "Thou art more affectionate than a mother!" and begged forgiveness for the trouble he gave God. "All I wanted," he said, "is a place to rest my head at your feet."

A cry of joy rose on the ghats and Tukaram was carried home to be feasted and worshipped by the whole town. The *kirtana* of "Vithala, Vithala", never ceased throughout the night as everyone repeated the holy name with increasing gusto.

The pundit however did not demur from his purpose and continued to harass the devotee. Instigated by him, some people went as far as throwing boiling water over Tukaram and his agony was intense.

Meanwhile, Rameshwar Bhat went to Poona to have the *darshan* of Naganath. On the way, he rested at the garden of a fakir named Anagada Shah. Attracted by the cool waters of a spring, he went and bathed in it, incurring thus the curse of the fakir for polluting his precious spring water. The result was that Bhat was attacked by a troublesome skin disease

and a constant burning feeling. No matter how much cool water and wet clothes he applied and renowned cures he tried, his state of health did improve.

People began to say that this was the just retribution from Panduranga, for having tormented his devotee. But Rameshwar Bhat in his pride refused to listen. He finally went to Alandi where he took the vow of meditating on saint Jnaneshwar's *samadhi* until God showed him the way. The saint appeared to him in a dream and ordered him to seek shelter and surrender at Tukaram's feet.

So, at last, giving up his stubborn pride, the pundit reached Dehu and fell before Tuka, throwing himself at his mercy. Tuka lifted him gently to his feet and at the touch of his hands, the burning and misery of Rameshwar Bhat subsided entirely. The saint composed verses on his behalf and taught him. From then on, Rameshwar Bhat became his devoted disciple, and one of those who recorded the events of his life.

Soothing the mortified pundit Tuka explained: "When the mind is pure, fire doesn't burn, wild beasts of prey do not harm one, as man is at peace with the universe. All this will happen when one realizes that the same Infinite Being abides in all creatures." Thus did a near-illiterate man grasp so simply and beautifully the subtle truth of the highest philosophy of Vedanta's universal Oneness.

Now, the fakir in his garden heard of the miraculous cure of Rameshwar Bhat and wished to visit that great saint who had the power to remove his curse.

He possessed a small vessel in which no matter

how much flour was poured, it would never fill. He felt that only he who had performed the miracle of curing Bhat would be able to fill the same and he left for Dehu and called at Tukaram's house. Women were busy inside at the grinding stones. Seeing a beggar waiting outside, Tuka's little daughter took a fistful of flour from the grind and came out to offer it to him. As she tried to pour it out into his vessel, the fakir thought her clumsy and slapped her hand, spilling half the flour on the ground. "Can't you see and learn how to give alms properly?" he shouted. With the remaining flour, she filled his vessel to the brim and Anagada Shah looked at her, wonderstruck.

He bowed and asked: "Is your name Tukaram?"

"Don't be silly," said the girl, "that's my father and he is busy at present singing *bhajans* at the temple."

The fakir hastened to the temple and fell full length at Tukaram's feet. He remained two days in his company, listening to his *kirtanas* and teachings and then went away, his heart at peace.

There was a man called Mumbaji Gosavi who always found means to quarrel with Tukaram. One night, a buffalo gifted to Jijai by her father got loose and ransacked Mumbaji's garden. After heartily abusing Tuka for this, Mumbaji put a thick hedge of thorns which blocked the way for several devotees attending Tuka's *kirtanas* at the temple. So Tuka himself removed part of the fence to allow them across and take part in the *kirtana*. Just then the owner arrived and in a fit of blind rage, he snatched a bunch of thorn branches and lashed at Tuka all over with them.

As Mumbaji was obviously absent during the *kirtana*, Tuka went down to his place with his bleeding feet and apologized humbly for having caused him some annoyance by removing his fence, and then he requested his presence at the *kirtana*. The man felt deeply ashamed and repentant and fell at Tuka's feet, begging to be forgiven.

Tukaram reached the height of his fame as a true saint of Maharashtra concurrently with Shivaji's attainment in his own sphere. Shivaji who had captured Torana Fort at the age of 14 when Tuka was just beginning to be known, was duly influenced by the saints as the years went by. The records of those days show that they met on several occasions. Shivaji wanted in fact to put the saint's virtue to test before he accepted his words and teachings.

While Tukaram was busy one night with devotees inside his house, messengers from Shivaji came to the door-step and inquired from his wife whether the saint Tukaram lived there. Taking them to be another batch of unruly devotees whom she called wreckers of homes, she brusquely told them to go and get lost. "But", said one of the messengers, "we come from His Highness the King Shivaji with gifts for you and the saint."

Her attitude changed so fast that before anyone could bat an eye-lid, she was all over them with sweet words and apologies.

"Forgive me," she said, "I took you for some of those mad people who come and beat the *tal* at all hours of day or night. Pray, come inside and what have you brought for us from the King?"

"We hope you will like what the great King sends

you. Here is a couple of saris especially embroidered in gold and silk with exquisite designs from the famous town of Paitan. Here is a gem-studded cap for your little boy and a *jhari* embroidered shawl for your husband. And these are ornaments fit to grace the neck of a queen. How do you like this golden necklace of pearls and rubies? There are delicately chiselled bangles, and this...and that..."

Yes, there were so many beautiful ornaments and clothes which the poor lady could not have even dreamt of, leave alone wearing in a life time, and gold coins, silver and silks. How generous was the King! How highly he ranked her humble husband, always immersed in his songs and prayers. Ah, here he comes.

"Aha! Just look at all the beautiful things our Shivaji Raya has sent us!" Tuka's eyes widened in astonishment as he looked at his wife and children prancing around with the costly clothes wrapped round their shoulders and the gems they wore, flashing in the light of the lamps.

"See," she said, proudly uncovering her neck to reveal cascades of gold and pearls, "we are nearly covered in gold. Oh, I never thought such a day would dawn in all my life! Aren't you pleased to see all this?"

Tuka's silence discomfited her a little and she asked with a tinge of anxiety in her voice: "Why don't you speak?"

"Speak? You want me to speak, of what? About these trinkets you are not ashamed to wear and display? Like a foolish doll sauntering about with that vile metal, the germ of envy, jealousy and all the

world's pitfalls! I who have given up all worldly possessions should now admire the way you parade with our children, exhibiting what causes a saint's downfall? Do you think I value gold more than a piece of clay? Take off these unnecessary articles, none of them will enter my house. This is the house of the Lord and not a worldly shop!"

Jijai, crestfallen, dared not in front of the King's emissaries remonstrate in her usual manner against her husband's saintly advice and one by one, slowly and reluctantly, discarded the brilliant necklace, the silks and the bangles, while Tuka watched and not until the last of the gifts was shed, did he smile and thank the Lord. Then turning to the messengers, he begged their forgiveness for having refused the costly gifts of the generous King. He offered them hospitality and chanted softly, 'Panduranga, Panduranga!'

"You see," he explained, "I am a poor man and intend to remain so, for if I were to accept riches, I would surely lose my devotion to God. Everything, including one's body must be sacrificed in the quest for realization. My Vithala is all the riches I hanker after, my joy is at His hallowed feet and I need nothing more."

A man who was closely watching these happenings, concealed behind a pillar, was none other than Shivaji Maharaj himself. Young though he was, he had a mature mind that hungered after truth. He was as intense on his purpose as Tuka was on his.

Both were determined to achieve their goals. Shivaji was fighting for the return of *Dharma* and the expulsion of the invaders. He came forward and humbly touched Tukaram's feet. The saint specially

composed verses of teachings for the King, and then spoke explaining why he had spurned the royal gifts: "What attractions has this world for me? The ant and the King are alike to my mind and gold and clay too are the same. All heaven resides in my house, what else can I desire?"

However, when Shivaji insisted that he should be accepted as a disciple, Tuka felt that Swami Ramdas who lived on the banks of the Krishna, near Satara would be better suited to become his Guru. Ramdas had the wisdom of a sage and the know-how of the world well balanced. He believed in active religion whereas Tuka was a mystic and nothing existed for him other than the Lord. Worldly matters had lost their interest for him and so he counselled Shivaji to seek shelter at Ramdas's feet.

Yet Shivaji did not give up his relationship with Tuka. The King enjoyed Tuka's *kirtans* and it was in a temple, while they sang in ecstasy, that news reached them that the soldiers of a Muslim Sardar had surrounded the place. There was now no route of escape for the great King. Shivaji touched Tuka's feet and told him about their predicament, while a great commotion shook the *kirtana* participants.

Tears came to Tuka's eyes: "O Lord," he prayed, "I cannot bear to see others suffer! Whoever heard that such a calamity should overcome people engaged in singing Thy name? Oh, We have been put to shame! I do not fear death, but let not these devotees be plunged in grief! Art Thou not present where Thy praise is sung? O! My Lord, show Thyself to us!"

And the intensity of the *kirtana* was redoubled. Tuka was lost in the name of God.

It is said that Lord Vithala was pleased to grant his prayer. Soon were seen several Shivajis escaping through the temple's different doors and in many directions. The enemy attempted to pounce on each, chasing them to a great distance where they were left to wonder how they had suddenly disappeared, thus allowing ample time for the real Shivaji to make a safe and quiet get-away.

Tuka's rise to spiritual illumination and the ultimate Self-realisation did not come as a matter of course. Long were the tests, tears and feverish longings and agonising pangs of separation the saint had to suffer.

He touched every stage of the devotee's arduous progress, often plunging into depths of dark despair which left him ranting and raving in anger against God; at other times, he tormented himself with the thought and memory of his sins that stood as obstacles on his way. He pined for God like a lost child, putting up with untold hardships and humiliations. Nothing deterred Tuka and the more he suffered, the nearer he was drawn to God, the more he cursed and cried, the more he loved Him until the Lord Himself came to appease his tenacious child.

Tukaram called God a liar and a deceiver yet he implored him as a child crying for its mother, to grant him the divine vision. He called himself his own enemy and felt a great disgust of the world, yearning for the company of the saints. Years passed while his longing assumed such proportions as to render him senseless. "What is the use of gold reflected in a

mirror, of what use are to me your vain promises?" he cried in his sufferings. He became impermeable to the curses and abuses of Jijai who was out of her wits with a husband whose feet never seemed to touch the ground while his mind craved day and night for something abstract.

"O my Lord," cried Tuka's burning soul, "Why don't you pick me up as a mother does her child? I am wearied, Mother mine, and can walk no more!"

God's silence caused him to accuse Him of belying his own words through the saints and sages. He felt unwanted, rejected and a failure both in the material and spiritual worlds. He even thought of suicide.

And then, when he at last saw "the feet of the Formless Person" as he puts it, Tuka wept with joy and thanked the saints for their blessings.

"God's grace descended on me without any merit on my part," he would say in humility. God the Mother had fulfilled her pledge. "Thou art our ever-affectionate and loving Mother who bearest our burdens!"

Tukaram now found himself to be the witness and no more the doer. He realized the Oneness of what Vedantic teachers apprehend, and in his simple words he exclaimed:

"My country has become the Universe and I pervade the whole world. How can I worship Thee when all means of worship are identical with Thee? The whole Universe is filled by Thee and I am the on-looker!"

His spiritual hunger and the burning feeling have been appeased, the only thing he desired now

was to constantly dwell at the feet of the blissful Lord and, "play about him."

"Me and mine," he sings, "are no more! God and I shall now live together, never to be parted again."

His teachings are emphatic on the point of no compromise for those who sincerely wish to follow the path of Truth.

Those who want to fulfil the worldly and the spiritual life together shall accomplish neither." "One needs to surrender one's life to God. We ought to set all our belongings on fire and never look back, and then fly into Brahman as a fly dashes into a flame."

About castes, Tuka never cared. "Why, they have no significance for attaining God-realization. Even the Vedas and Shastras say that in the service of God, castes matter not." Asserts Tuka, "A Brahmin who doesn't care for the name of God is no Brahmin and an outcaste who loves the name of God is indeed a Brahmin."

"After all," concludes the saint, "all the different castes have sprung from the same Being..."

Like Sawata, the gardener saint of the 13th century, he cries in gratitude: "Thanks be to God for not making me a learned Brahmin. For, he sings, "He shall embrace the ignorant much more than the wise, for we are the poor in spirit and God will protect us in our helplessness."

Tuka harmonises Duality and Oneness or the form and formless aspects of God with the greatest ease as it seems to come to him most naturally.

How subtly does he express the state of the devotee in relation to God's many aspects: "As we en-

ter the temple of Pandhari, the image disappears as it merges into infinite Light, for the God of Pandhari is merely the external symbol of the All-Pervasive Light."

Tuka wants to take birth again and again to serve his beloved Lord. In this he shows again the stamp of the complete devotee who spurns the peace of deliverance in *Mukti* for the love of serving God, from birth to birth.

"A saint," he declares, "devotes himself entirely to the happiness of others, his worship consists of helping his fellow beings."

"The saint rests his mind on the feet of God and asks for nothing." "Thy hand is on my head and my heart is on Thy Feet."

Thus Tuka went on and on in the Bliss he earned so hard and which he held so dear and gave so plentifully to all who came to him. And there was nothing that God would not do for his dearest devotee.

When a bereaved mother came one day in a *kirtana* in Lohagaon and threw her dead child at his feet, Tuka moved by compassion prayed to the Lord to show the power of his Presence and bring back the child to life. God obliged as his *abhangs* recall the fact.

As an eye witness relates it, on the second day of the dark fortnight of Phalgun, in 1650, a Thursday again, God came in person to carry Tukaram away to Vaikuntha (Heaven) in His heavenly chariot.

Rameshwar Bhat says that Tuka left in a *Vimana* (flying chariot).

Tuka's songs were recorded to the very last as he described the giant eagle Garuda with ruffled feathers

and piercing eyes, telling him: "Do not fear! Do not fear!" and rang with the praises of the Lord's beautiful form wrapped in yellow garments of light which illumined the compass and the whole universe.

Tuka took leave of all present and called on his wife to join him on his exit from this world, but the bewildered lady asked in anguish where she would be able to fill her water-pots and who would take care of their buffalo!

None thought that the following *abhangs* of Tuka were his last.

"The Lord stands and waits, I must make haste, I leave, my friends. . . ."

Before the astonished devotees, Tuka was lifted bodily from the banks of the Indrayani river and carried away into space from where he entirely disappeared.

Rameshwar Bhat and Tuka's younger brother Kanhoba and others, remained three days on the river ghat singing *kirtanas* and fasting, praying to Tuka Buwa to give them a token of his presence wherever he was.

On the third day, Tuka's cymbals and *asana* fell down from the skies and the devotees sang in joy as the sound of "Vithala, Vithala, Panduranga," and, "Ramakrishna Hari," rang for days on end as it goes even now every year in celebration of the event.

SANT RAMADASA

Chanting mantras all the while, the priest set himself to the task of preparing the ghee oblations. The participants, numbering two Brahmin families of Jamba and Asangaon and their friends, readied themselves for the solemn moment or *Muhurta* when the sacred vows of the young couple would be recited before the holy fire.

Banaji Buwa's little daughter, her eyes aglow with excitement, leaned against him while he supported her hand holding the sacrificial ladle. Her prospective husband Narayana, a proud lad of 12, surrounded by his mother and brothers, sat upright with an air of distant reverie on his grave countenance.

The assistant glanced up at the priest and at a signal activated the fire. The priest put the sacrificial ladle in Narayana's hand and commanded the assembly's attention with the portentous word: "*Savadhan*," heralding the *Muhurta* or auspicious moment and at the mention of "*Savadhan*" (Take care!) Narayana's mind jerked awake.

"Take care!" Yes. Take care! This was truly a divine warning reaching him through the wall of ceremonial paraphernalia. Wasn't the priest's word a God-sent arrow piercing a way through his bondage and marking a path of light to his soul's freedom? "O Lord, I shall take care. This I will!"

With the agility of a jungle cat, his limbs stret-

ched under him and loosened as if shot from a spring and in one bound he was out of the marriage pandal and in two more he disappeared out of sight, not to be seen again for nearly 24 years.

Born on the 9th day of the bright fortnight of Chaitra in the year 1608, Narayana was the third son of a Brahmin couple, Suryajipant and Ranubai Samartha, Rigvedic Brahmins of Jamadagni lineage, who lived in Jamba by the Godavari. The other two sons were Gangadharapant and Ramiramadasapant. Suryajipant passed away soon after having performed Narayana's *Upanayana* (Thread Ceremony).

Ranubai often reproached her little boy for not taking part in household work. She would find him dreaming in a corner of the kitchen and once she asked him:

"What do you think you are doing here all by yourself?"

"O Mother," he would reply, "I was reflecting upon the Universe."

So they tried marriage as the age old panacea for all young men's mental ills, with the young daughter of a friend, Banaji Bodalapurikar.

Narayana who longed to receive initiation into the mysteries of spiritual life had approached Gangadhar but his brother refused to initiate him because he was too young.

The boy would have run away from home then and there in search of the Real Teacher, had he not bidden his time out of regard for his mother.

But the electrifying effect of the priest's word had touched him at the very core of his dilemma and at the most critical moment of his life. Having thus

decamped, he reached the Panchavati, near Nasik, the scene of the legendary kidnapping of Sita.

He found a cave on a hillock called Takali by the mouth of a small tributary of the Godavari. He remained in that cave for 12 years, doing severe *tapas-charya* standing waist deep in the water at the confluence of the rivers, from sunrise to mid-day, meditating on Raghunatha.

The Lord appeared to him in the form of Shri Rama and initiated him.

From then on, he took the name of Ramadasa, living on *Madhukari*, collecting morsels of food from several households just as a bee collects honey from flowers, which he first offered to Rama, meditating in the river and reading the *Puranas*.

After four years he acquired a disciple who was gifted to him as a child. It is said that having revived from death the child's father and blessed the couple to beget eight sons, the parents offered him their first born and Ramadasa named him Uddhava. He brought him up in the true tradition of the *sadhus*, free from attachment and devoted to austerity, truth and the service of *dharma*.

From 1632, Ramadasa spent another 12 years visiting *Tirthas*. He prayed before the 12 Jyotirlingas, resided in the seven eternal cities and reached the four Maths at the confines of Bharata.

During his extended journeys across the land, Ramadasa recoiled at the sight of the miseries wrought upon the people by the foreign invaders. The precarious state of the religious *tirthas* constantly under threat of pillage and desecration, and the floods of forcible conversions appalled him and he began to see

Hinduism in danger of extinction. Justice and *dharma* should be revived and a powerful secular government should reestablish those ideals. People ought to be taught the ethics and tenets of their own religion and to fight for their own rights so that they may form a society which enables them to live at peace and free from fear.

Ramadasa had made his plans and returned to Panchavati at a time when Uddhava and his followers were celebrating Rama *Navami* with great pomp and rejoicings. But Ramadasa merely told his disciple: "I shall send you a message some time later, then come." And he left for the banks of the Krishna.

He reached the source of the river at Mahabaleshwar in Vaishakha and built a Hanuman temple there. Later at the insistence of the brothers Divakara and Ananta Bhat Mahableshwarkar, he came to Wai, a graceful city by the Krishna and established another temple to Maruti on the southern ghats of the river, in Siddhanathwadi, Wai.

Then he proceeded to Jaranda where he met many holy men, including Sant Tukarama. Later he left for Karavir, addressing people on the way and rousing their spirits to fight the evils of lethargy, oppression and despair.

He instilled in them the sparks of spiritual awakening so as to strengthen the bonds of *dharma* towards an enlightened society and the purification from fear and superstition.

Compared to other and earlier saints of the *Vithala Sampradaya*, Ramadasa stood out in a class all by himself. Whereas those great souls campaigned for a revival of *dharma* alone and did not seek to

make a great many disciples or change the political map, Ramadasa went out of his way to spread his creed with the zeal of a missionary. He aimed at reforming society and getting rid of foreign invaders. He used direct methods and a language geared to the necessities of the day.

He was more objective and believed that a religion which has become decadent and was in imminent danger of being wiped out should become active and first reform itself in order to be able to overcome such threats.

Thus, he gathered numberless disciples who set themselves forthwith to spread the message in their own towns and villages, from Karhad, Shahpur, Miraj, Chaphala, Shirgaon, Masur, etc. etc., forming societies, building maths and temples and making more disciples.

Men, women and entire families fired with enthusiasm, renounced the world and dedicated their lives to this new movement. They showed great and unflinching faith in God and trust in their Guru. This was the beginning of the *Ramadasa Sampradaya*.

Ramadasa established the main maths in Shirgaon and Chaphala. He sent a letter to Uddhava and asked him to join him. He was given charge of the Domagaon Math. His faithful disciple Kalyana with his mother and a friend, Dattatreya, ran the Shirgaon Math. Thus he opened eleven Maths and temples in different places.

The great King Shivaraya (Shivaji) as we have seen in Tukaram's life, lived for the same ideal and it was meet that those two pioneers of religious revival and Maratha revolution should have met.

Counselled by Sant Tukaram whose foresight caused him to go to Ramadasa, Shivaji found indeed the spiritual Master of his dreams in the short and lively sannyasin of the lineage of Jamadagni.

They were both intelligent, smart and shrewd judges of people. They both felt the burning urge to free Maharashtra from oppression and re-establish *dharma* and justice in the land.

Ramadasa bemoaned incessantly the wave of new materialism, the perpetual insecurity in politics and warfare, decried the overwhelming selfishness at all levels of society and the plethora of fake religious teachers, atheists, and above all, the apathy of the people as a whole.

"A Sadhu", he preached, "should awaken others but not remain in their midst, he should go on to help others and regularly meditate in the solitude of the hills and valleys."

In 1647, Ramadasa had discovered an image of Rama deep in the bed of the Krishna river at Angapur and consecrated it in a shrine a year later, in Chaphala.

In the year 1649, a Thursday, on the bright Navami of Vaishakh, Ramadasa initiated Shivaji in the Shinganavadi gardens near Chaphala.

After leaving Divakara in charge of the Math, in the Ashadha of the same year, Ramadasa accompanied by his disciples Kalyana, Akka and Ananta Swami, visited Pandharpur, where he met again with Sant Tukaram, a year before the latter's passing away, and then he left for Shivathara where he wrote his *Dasabodha* and *Abhangas* and then returned to Jamba. Some say he stayed at Parli.

In 1655, Shivaraya offered his whole kingdom at the feet of the Guru, who as history knows, returned it to the King, asking him to rule in his stead. The same year Ramadasa went back to Jamba to attend on his dying mother.

Ramadasa and Shivaji formed a perfect team dedicated to the uplift of their people. One as the soldier, leader and statesman, the other as the wise counsellor. In 1661, Shivaji having built the great fortress of Pratapghad, had his Guru Ramadasa install in it the beautiful image of Tulaja Bhawani, one of the aspects of the Goddess Durga and patron of the King, and endless were the prayers of the saint to the fierce Destroyer of Evil, the divine Mother, to further the cause of his King.

Shivaji built several forts and conquered many more, having perfected the uses of guerilla warfare. Ramadasa finally decided to settle down atop the natural fortress of Sajjanagad, near Satara. Most Deccan Plateau mountains present ready-made bases for fortresses' sides and tops. Shivaraya fortified Sajjanagad and built a great fort.

Later on, as he watched the building of Samanagad in the vicinity, his heart swelled with pride at the sight of the thousands of workers swarming all over the mountain from the valley to the summit, working with zeal and agility while carrying out his behest. At this moment, Ramadasa who sensed his thoughts came over to the King and called his attention to a curious phenomenon.

The saint picked up a rock from the basket of one of the workers and smashed it against a wall. To everyone's surprise it was found that the stone con-

tained a live frog which leapt out of its erstwhile prison unharmed.

Taken aback by the wonderful sight, the King with the help of his sharp acumen was quick to grasp the meaning of his Guru's action: If God could provide a frog's wherewithal to live within a stone, who was he to think of himself as strong and powerful? Everything was indeed the Lord's play. God alone was the Doer and he, the King, was merely his servant and his instrument.

When Ramadasa saw that his disciple had shed his pride like an unwanted parasite, he smiled. This was the way the Master taught and no wonder Shivaji felt unabated love and devotion for such an exceptional Teacher.

In his letters to him, which are still in existence, Shivaji pays tribute to him in the highest terms, and he constantly used to make grants for various temples and Maths.

"...In the establishment of religion, and the service of God... in the relieving of the misery of my subjects and in their protection and help and that I should seek to obtain spiritual satisfaction in the midst of this duty, you were also pleased to say that whatever I wished from the bottom of my heart would be fulfilled for me..." he wrote. This is only an example of their close relationship.

This active saint's thoughts and ideas are clearly expressed in his masterpiece the *Dasabodha*. It is an explicit work on the aspirant's *sadhana*, on worldly advice and follows the ideal of Vedanta.

If like Tukarama, Namadeva and some others, he decries idol worship, it is again to detract people

from bigotry and from forgetting the ultimate and underlying Reality.

Idol worship is shown in its true perspective as being merely a step towards God-realization. Ramadasa defines all the stages in this direction and emphasises the need for dedicating one's life to the Ideal.

In order to succeed, the devotee should have a natural attitude of trust. He should also use his intellect to discriminate between the Real and the unreal. One should meditate morning, noon and evening and repeat God's name constantly, whether overcome with happiness or sorrow. To ease the strain of carrying on one's duties, these should be done while repeating the Name. His advice to harassed householders and others in prey to difficulties is compassionate yet direct.

Preaching for the revival of his own religion did not make Ramadasa a bigot though. "It matters not which Name we utter, so long as we do so regularly and continuously." He extols meditation as a necessity for all *sadhakas* as it makes one realise that God alone is real and all the rest an illusion. "Only those who reach the top rung of experience can testify to this very truth."

Yet he justly warns: "The desire for fruits is indeed the obstacle between us and God, whereas disinterested love for God wins all!"

Likewise, a *kirtan* doesn't depend on the correct use of *ragas* and *tala*. It should be done in ecstasy of love or as a spontaneous offering to God.

Time and again did this enlightened saint warn those who feel impressed by miracles. "Is that a true sign of spirituality?" According to him, the true sign

is when the saint has left the company of women and the lure of riches, looking upon them as vomit and not otherwise.

But wise as he was, he still counselled his disciples into encouraging the good side of such people: "When they possess an element of devotion, we ought to support it instead of exposing their hypocrisy." He would conclude saying, "The only place of complete rest is in the Atman alone."

One can see how his knowledge of the world fits in with his spiritual teachings. His aim was to reach everyone and encourage even the weak to spurts of renewal, courage and strength.

It was in 1674 that Chhatrapati Shivaji was crowned King and he stayed for 45 days at Sajjangad with Ramadasa, feeding and caring for the poor.

In 1678 Ramadasa ordered new images of Sita, Rama and Laxmana to be made in Tanjore and sent Kalyana to take over the Math at Domagaon.

Then Shivaraya who visited his Guru for the last time in the month of Pausha in 1679, was informed by him of the approaching end of his reign and mission as his soul would soon gain release from the body. The Chhatrapati passed away as predicted on the following Chaitra of 1680.

The kingdom passed into the hands of Shivaji's son Sambhaji, who, in spite of his very worldly trend of mind, showed extraordinary courage and faith in the hard times and martyrdom that were to be his share.

He forthwith paid his respects to the great Guru, along with his minister Ramachandrapant, in the month of Jyeshtha, and spent eight days with the saint.

Following the arrival of the new images from Tanjore, Ramadasa ceremoniously installed them at Sajjangad, on the fifth day of the dark fortnight of Magha in 1681 and barely four days later, the saint passed away in meditation. It was Magha's dark Navami, 1681.

So went Ramadasa, the soldier saint, the yogi and the devotee of the Lord who said: "If the cloud does not shed drops of rain into the beak of the *chataka*, the *chataka* will yet yearn for the cloud... If the moon does not rise to bring nectar to the *chakora*, the *chakora* will nevertheless long for the moon... We should never relax our affection for God. We should know God as our Friend, our Mother, our Father, our Learning, our wealth, our All in All!"

Whether of the *Vithala Sampradaya*, *Natha Sampradaya* or any other *Sampradaya*, the saints seem to evoke an imagery that tallies as they all gather their experience from the same source.

Ramadasa had many worthy disciples among whom the most noteworthy was his elder brother Ramiramadasa who was elder by three years and also passed away three years before him. He was an independent saint though much influenced by Ramadasa. He wrote *Bhaktirahasya* and *Sulabhodaya*.

Kalyana looked after the Math at Domagaon from 1678 to 1714. Many years after the Guru's passing, the bones of the saint were at last being carried from Sajjangad to Kashi for immersion in the Ganga. As they paid a visit to Domagaon on the way, the participants found to their surprise that Kalyana had expired only moments before they arrived, so they carried away the bones of Guru and disciple together.

Kalyana never quarrelled or argued with others regarding the management of Maths.

Such was not the case with the other disciples at Chaphala and Sajjangad. Diwakara Gosavi and Uddhava often entered into controversies and bickerings on the subject of the right to succession in these Maths. Ramadasa seems to have had Diwakar in mind first and then changed in favour of Uddhava at the time of his death.

The matter came to court and Sambhaji, having examined the witnesses, etc. gave a ruling in favour of Diwakara. Uddhava then, in contrition, repaired to Takali where he prayed and fasted for the remaining 15 years of his life. He died in 1699.

Vasudeva Gosavi was one of the most faithful of disciples. So was Dinakara Gosavi who was besides a poet who wrote *Swanubhava Dinakara* and conducted a Math at Tisgaon in the Ahmednagar District. His writings reflect a great deal the thoughts of Sant Jnaneshwar.

Chimanabai, daughter of Rudrajipant Deshpande, became known as Akka (elder sister) and was one of the best known female disciples of the saint. She came from Karhad. And Venubai, also a Deshpande from Miraj, wrote a work "The marriage of Sita" and had her Math at Hiraj. She died in the presence of her Guru. Her *samadhi* lies at Sajjangad. Akka who lived 40 years after the passing away of Ramadasa caused the great temple of Rama to be built on Sajjangad.

Giridhara, a disciple of Venubai and Bayabai had been instructed by Ramadasa to conduct *kirtanas* and had a Math at Bida. He wrote the *Samartha Pra-*

tapa, a chronicle of the life and events regarding the saint from eye witness accounts, 50 years after the death of Ramadasa. It is in that work that the relation between Ramadasa and Chatrapati Shivaji is depicted in true perspective.

LATIB SHAH AND SHAIKH MOHAMMAD

Latib Shah was a Muslim and yet follower of the well-known saint Eknath of the 16th century. He became a fervent devotee of Krishna and his *abhangas* are suffused with renunciation of the world of Maya and deep longing for the realisation of God.

"By the Guru's grace," he proclaims, "all is attainable."

The Muslim king who heard of him, sent soldiers over to fetch him. But since they would not return, he went himself to investigate the mystery.

There indeed was Latib Shah reciting to an attentive audience the beauties of the *Bhagavata* and explaining the meaning of the same in words exuding devoted feelings for God.

Behind him stood a large frescoe on the wall, depicting Sri Krishna standing by while Radha offered him a pan.

"What is this," cried the Badshah who wanted to disrupt the meeting. "Why isn't Krishna eating the pan offered by Radha?"

Latib Shah turned to the picture gracing the wall and folding his palms he prayed: "O Lord, do accept the *pan* proffered by Radha."

Then and there, to the surprise of all, the picture seemed to come to life and as Sri Krishna opened his mouth, Radha placed the *pan* between his lips.

The king was wonderstruck and fell at the feet of Latib Shah.

Latib Shah left some *abhangas* in Hindi, where he sees the whole world as a play of the Lord, from which a Guru alone has the power to rescue one.

Shaikh Mohammad was born in 1565, the son of Raje Mohammad and Punhalesha.

Raje Mohammad learnt yoga under Chand Bodhale. He was a contemporary of Shivaji's grandfather Maloji Bhonsle, who took him to Markarapur and left him there in the care of a good Sadhu. One Sunday, as he sat in deep meditation on the river ghats, a snake bit him thrice, but Shaikh Mohammad prayed to the Sad-Guru of Advaita (the school of oneness), and came to no harm.

He wrote later a book on yoga called *Yoga Sangram* and sent it over to Kashi with two of his disciples, but the Brahmins threw it into the Ganga.

Shaikh Mohammad came to know of it through his yogic powers and sent two more disciples to retrieve it. When they at last asked the Brahmins to return the manuscript, one of them went down the ghats pointing at the water and there for all to see, was the book, floating down the river and coming ashore, in perfect condition.

One day as he was conducting a *kirtan* and *katha*, he suddenly leapt up in the air and caught hold of a corner of the *mandap* cloth and rubbed it very vigorously before resuming his seat and the *katha*.

The participants however wanted to know the reason of this strange behaviour and Shaikh Mohammad informed them that the *mandap* under which the great saint Tukaram was holding a *kirtana* at the

same time, in Dehu, had caught fire and so he put it out from here.

People were nonplussed and sent the Patil to Dehu to ascertain the facts. After he brought back the news that these events had actually taken place, the villagers were convinced of Shaikh Mohammad's earnestness and respected him all the more.

But they asked him why Panduranga hadn't extinguished the fire on the spot; surely he still has his devotees' good at heart?

"That," said Shaikh Mohammad, "is exactly what he did. We who are here to do his bidding as his servants, did the job for him from a distance. That is why He showed me what happened at Dehu."

His *abhangas*, in Marathi, breathe of the Truth that is the essence of all things and which must be realised in this very life, if one is blessed with a realised Guru.

NILOBA AND OTHER DISCIPLES OF TUKARAM

Niloba Makassare was the last great Varkari (pilgrim) of the Vithala Sampradaya's line of saints which flourished unbroken for five centuries throughout Maharashtra.

Born in Pimpalaner in 1635, he was better known as Pimpalanerkar. From childhood, his devotion to God singled him out as a born devotee whose heart, like a flower yearning for the light, was ever open to the grace of God.

He conducted beautiful *kirtanas* vibrating with divine love. Sincerely humble and content with what he got, he had no desires for worldly riches or fame and though married, one can say that Niloba lived like a real *sadhu* at heart.

It happened on a pilgrimage to holy Pandharpur that he heard from the devotees there about the greatness of Tukaram as a saint. So Niloba without wasting a moment, left for Dehu and surrendered at Tuka's feet. Thus he became one of his 14 *tal*-strikers who beat time with various instruments during the *kirtanas* of the great saint.

When the marriage of Niloba's daughter was to be celebrated, his house was empty and he didn't have a thing to cook for the wedding feast. His wife was full of anxiety but Niloba didn't seem perturbed for he had put his cares in the hands of Vithala (Krishna).

On the day preceding the marriage, Panduranga

came to his house in the guise of an old Brahmin. He kept some grains tied up in the corner of his *dhoti* and told Niloba: "I'm a poor Brahmin. I have some grain which I want you to cook for me, for I wish to eat here."

"Don't waste your grain," said Niloba, "come and eat with us."

"But I'm terribly hungry," retorted the Brahmin, "so take this *Shidha*, mix it with your wedding stuff and please make haste to prepare *puris* and serve them now.'

Niloba's wife did as he had desired; she mixed his gift with the wedding preparations and fed him. On the wedding day, the Brahmin stayed on to help and they fed 500 people and served another 500 the next day and so on for several days without any of the food getting less. Niloba felt at peace in his heart, leaving the worrying to Panduranga (Krishna) and meditating on Him.

One day Niloba prayed to Tuka for *Diksha* (initiation). "Yes some day I will give it to you", promised the saint. Later he even assured him that he would not leave this world without first initiating him.

So Niloba retired to his own village to await the call of the Master. One can imagine his stupefaction and sorrow at the sudden news of Tukaram's departure for heaven.

Niloba's pain struck at his vitals and hastening to Dehu, he took a vow to give up life unless Tukaram came before him and gave him *Diksha*.

So, holding fast to his resolve, Niloba sat on the ghat by the Indrayani river for 42 days without eat-

ing, drinking or speaking. Neither did he feel the slightest urge to satisfy even his body's needs. He had entirely withdrawn his mind from the senses while his heart cried in the bitter agony of separation which he could no longer bear. At the end, Vithala graciously gave him his *darshan*, over which Niloba composed a beautiful poem.

Tukaram initiated him and taught him the essence of Advaita (Monism) or Self-realization in universal Oneness. In lieu of *prasad*, Tuka gave Niloba his cymbals and *Vina*.

Then Niloba asked: "Maharaj, after me, whom should these *tals* and *vina* belong to?"

Tuka said, "In the village of Showoor near Aurangabad, there's a Brahmin named Shankara; give them to him."

Niloba followed his Master's instructions and towards the end of his days, he surrendered the *tals* and *Vina* to Shankar Swami of Showoor. The latter was found to be a great devotee of Lord Panduranga and of his saint, the blessed Tukaram.

Niloba's verses are not perfect, elegant and smooth as those of Tuka's. They are nevertheless full of selfless love and very much liked by the Var-karis of Pandharpur.

Disciples of Tukaram:

We must first mention Tuka's own little brother, Kanhoba who became his disciple and belonged to the 14 in charge of the *tal* (measure) in his *kirtanas*. He has many *abhangas* to his name.

Bahinibai, born in 1662 at Sirur, came to Tukaram at the age of 12. She recorded the spiritual lineage of Tukaram in her *abhangas* and later became a

follower of Swami Ramadas who gave her an image of Maruti which is still worshipped in her household.

Mahadajipant was the Kulkarni of Dehu. A man of pure integrity and a profound devotee of Tukaram. He rebuilt the temple of Vithala out of funds from the revenue of a farm which was gifted to Tukaram but which he refused to accept.

He saw to Tuka's worldly welfare and protected his interests since that was completely out of his range while he swam in the sea of bliss that was God.

Santaji Jaganade known as Santaji Teli, and Gangarama were both deeply attached to Tukaram and wrote down his *abhangas*. They were some of his most sincere disciples.

Rameshwar Bhat was a Brahmin hailing from Karnataka who settled at Vagholi whose tutelar deity Vyaghreshwar he worshipped. His *arati* of Tukaram which he composed with great devotion is well known for its beauty and depth of feelings.

Shivabha Kasara of Lohagaon like Bhat, started his career by first hating Tukaram and then becoming his disciple. His wife who had been angered at his doing so, threw boiling water over Tukaram when he visited Lohagaon.

These are few of the saint's outstanding disciples, as little is known of the others. Each great saint collected a galaxy of devoted followers of whom there are no consistent reports or records.

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